

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **An Investigation In To The Phenomenon Of The Black Madonna**

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**An Investigation In To The Phenomenon Of The Black Madonna**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of**

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## **Abstract**

The following thesis investigates the figure of the black Madonna. Because there is a lack of information on why and when these figures were created, this has created an air of mystery and intrigue around them and they have become the subject of highly speculative assumptions. The thesis has two main aims. Firstly, it analyses the trends in the existing literature; it considers the problems such research raises and how these might be addressed more critically. Secondly, this thesis will argue that it is possible to adopt a different way of approaching the subject of black Madonnas.

The research in this thesis was conducted because it was felt not only were there were gaps in the existing literature, but there were questions raised in this literature that largely went unanswered. A significant section of the existing literature has used what might be described as a 'grand narrative' approach to the subject, trying to find an explanation that can account for the existence of all black Madonnas and what these images might mean. This thesis adopts a 'lived religion' approach to the study of black Madonnas. By conducting an ethnographic, fieldwork based method, it looked at the place of the black Madonna at St Mary's Anglican Church, London and the relationship the congregation have with this black Madonna. It was found that this shrine challenged some of the existing assumptions about black Madonnas. Rather than the powerful, mysterious, esoteric alternative to the Virgin Mary portrayed in the previous literature, the black Madonna at St Mary's was not always a central feature for worshippers. This research demonstrates that different results may be obtained if the focus is on one shrine rather than a comparative study. It is the combination of a critical examination of the existing literature with the results of the fieldwork that has made this research an original contribution to the field of black Madonna studies.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my nans, Betty Landman and Patricia Killick, my aunties Joan and Doris Edwards and my cousin Tracy Vella – all of whom passed away whilst I was writing my research.

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm;

For love is as strong as death,

It's jealousy unyielding as the grave.

It burns like blazing fire,

Like a mighty flame

Many waters cannot quench love;

Rivers cannot sweep it away. (*Song of Songs*, Song 8, 6-7)

## **Introduction**

This thesis is concerned with the figure of the black Madonna. The image of the black Madonna is a prevalent one with some of the most famous shrines in Western Europe, such as Chartres Cathedral and Le Puy in France, Loreto in Italy and Einsiedeln in Switzerland, being home to black Madonnas (see figures 1-4).<sup>1</sup> The thesis has two main aims. Firstly, it analyses the trends in the existing literature; it considers the problems such research raises and how these might be addressed more critically. Secondly, this thesis will argue that it is possible to adopt a different way of approaching the subject of black Madonnas. For the purposes of this research, I have focused on a single black Madonna shrine and its worshippers. Whilst a single example may not be representative of all shrines, it is hoped that the results challenge some of the assumptions made by previous research. By doing so, this research makes an original contribution to the subject area.

In this introduction I begin by discussing why the category of black Madonna may be problematic and then move on to introduce some of the issues this research aims to address. I also set out why I have chosen the particular way of framing this thesis. I then introduce St Mary's Church and Shrine (fig.5) where I have conducted my research. The final section gives an overview of the thesis chapters.

## **Definitions, origins and meanings**

Precisely what constitutes a black Madonna is not straightforward. In his gazetteer of black Madonnas across the world, Ean Begg estimates that there are at least 450 images of the Virgin Mary across the world, even without including those in Africa, that are

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<sup>1</sup> All illustrations can be found in Appendix 1.

either black, dark brown or grey in colour.<sup>2</sup> However, Sarah Jane Boss argues that some statues which are no longer black are still labeled as ‘black Madonnas’ by the people who worship at that particular shrine, such as Our Lady of Orcival (fig.6).<sup>3</sup> Boss therefore defines the black Madonna as: ‘an image of the Virgin Mary whose devotees commonly refer to her as “black.”’<sup>4</sup>

The difficulties with trying to define what a black Madonna actually is are coupled with difficulties in trying to uncover why these images exist at all. Who created these images and when are also difficult to ascertain. It is the lack of information regarding origins of the black Madonna and what their blackness might signify that has led to these images being the subject of much speculation. Because there is no definitive explanation for the blackness of black Madonnas this has created an air of mystery and intrigue around them. Although as Begg’s estimate has shown they are not an uncommon figure, they become rather elusive. In this respect, the category of black Madonna appears to be an unstable one.

The attempt to solve these mysteries has contributed to the production of a substantial amount of information on black Madonnas, whether in the form of books, articles and websites. The initial idea for this research emerged out of reading about the place of the black Madonna in feminist spiritualities/goddess spiritualities and psychoanalytic studies. As this thesis will show, the black Madonna is a popular figure in these fields and much of the literature on black Madonnas draws on these approaches.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Arkana, 1996). p.3.

<sup>3</sup> See figure 5

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Jane Boss, "Black Madonnas," *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London, New York: Continuum, 2007). p.461.

<sup>5</sup> The following are just a few examples: Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London, New York: Penguin Arkana, 1993), Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, Caitlin Matthews, *Sophia - Goddess of Wisdom, Bride of God (New Revised Edition)* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers* (San Jose, New York: Authors Choice Press, 2001).



How might we account for this growth in interest on black Madonnas, and in particular the situating of this figure as an alternative one? I would suggest that in part this lies in a wider growth of interest in what might be described as ‘alternative’ or New Age spiritualities. It is possible that the popularity of the goddess theory to explain the existence of black Madonnas lay in the rise of what Gordon Lynch has described as ‘progressive spirituality’ which Lynch defines as: A particular form of religious ideology that has been refined over the past thirty or so years by a range of ‘organic intellectuals’ within the progressive milieu of western religion.<sup>6</sup>

Progressive spirituality is closely linked with the rise of second wave feminism and the growth of ‘green’ or ecological concerns. Lynch identifies feminist spirituality and a renewed interest in goddess worship as important aspects of these new movements. Feminist spirituality has had an important role in the development of black Madonna scholarship, with writers such Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum and Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba<sup>7</sup> linking the black Madonna with a wider context of other concerns within feminist spirituality.

In Christopher Partridge’s work *The Re-Enchantment of the West* he uses the term ‘occulture’ to describe a growth since the 1970s in a ‘new spiritual environment in the West.’<sup>8</sup> Partridge sees occulture as being broader in scope than the term ‘occult’ and argues that it includes:

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Lynch, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2007). p.10

<sup>7</sup> See for example Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy* (New York: toExcel Publications, 2000). Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (London, New York: T & T Clark International, 2004). p.4

A vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology, and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal. Occulture is the new spiritual environment in the West; the reservoir feeding new spiritual springs; the soil in which new spiritualities are growing. Things have changed. Spiritualities are not what they used to be – that's why they're flourishing.<sup>9</sup>

For Partridge, these alternative beliefs and practices are both influenced by and an influence on popular culture. There are certainly aspects of black Madonna literature that would fit in with Partridge's theory. I would argue that the growth in occulture has made a significant contribution to not only the interest in black Madonnas, but in the way this subject is approached and as this thesis will show, black Madonnas are consistently connected to other occult or esoteric subjects.

As the movements identified by Partridge have gained popularity, they would appear to have been, in part, responsible for the wider availability of information on black Madonnas. Until the early 1980s, most research on black Madonnas either remained outside of the English language, (such as the early works by French scholars), or in academic journals (such as the work of Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari).<sup>10</sup> Articles on the black Madonna by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh were published in a magazine that was widely available from newsagents and other retailers<sup>11</sup> exposing the black Madonna to the general public. The featuring of the black Madonna in this

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<sup>9</sup> Partridge, The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture, p.4

<sup>10</sup> The works of these scholars are dealt with in more detail in chapter one.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, "Virgins with a Pagan Past," The Unexplained 4 (1980), Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, "The Goddess Behind the Mask," The Unexplained 6 (1980), Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, "Guardians of the Living Earth," The Unexplained 8 (1980).

magazine, alongside article on subject matters such ESP, the Loch Ness Monster and Tarot cards positioned the black Madonna outside of mainstream Christianity and in a much more occult or esoteric field.

Although I shall be looking at these approaches in more detail in chapters one and three, I shall briefly outline the theories that emerge these fields. Firstly, it is claimed that the origins of the black Madonna can be traced to pre-Christian goddesses who were themselves portrayed as black or dark. Secondly, based on concepts from Jungian psychoanalytic theory, black Madonnas are considered an aspect of the mother archetype. Thirdly, the black Madonna is considered as more powerful alternative to the white representation of the Virgin Mary. Several writers have perceived hostility towards black Madonnas by church authorities,<sup>12</sup> and this is a theme which occurs frequently in the literature and one to which I return in later chapters of this thesis.

Given that an extensive body of literature on black Madonnas already exists, one might question why there should be a need for further research in this area. However, the existing literature raises interesting issues that are rarely explored within this field of study and it is hoped that this thesis will provide just such an exploration.

The sections of the literature on black Madonnas identified above, have attempted to provide what I describe as a ‘grand narrative’ to explain the phenomenon. Black Madonnas, regardless of their geographical location or historical/religious context, are identified as having not just similar origins but similar meanings as well. The emphasis in the ‘grand narrative’ approach is on finding an explanation to account for black

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin. pp.8-16 and Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy.

Madonnas in general, rather than taking each one on its own particular terms.<sup>13</sup> This has led to the construction of the black Madonna as an archetypal figure.

The impetus for choosing the black Madonna at St Mary's Church for the focus of this research came from a quote from Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum. Chiavola Birnbaum is the author of two books on the subject of black Madonnas as well printed and online articles.<sup>14</sup> In her second book, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*, Chiavola Birnbaum describes how the black Madonna demonstrates 'the heterogeneity and ubiquity of black Madonnas and other black women divinities who may be found all over the earth'<sup>15</sup> and the 'connection of black Madonnas with feminist consciousness.'<sup>16</sup> She then explains how: 'French scholars, in careful analysis, note that Protestant England has no indigenous images of black Madonnas (there are a few copies of European Catholic images).'<sup>17</sup>

The comment above demonstrates precisely the generalizing this thesis aims to question. Chiavola Birnbaum does not give references as to which scholars she is drawing on and does not make any attempt to challenge them on this point. This is surprising as in the particular section of the book where this claim is found, she is looking at a range of black Madonnas across the world. Whilst no one researcher could possibly know about every black Madonna everywhere, it is Chiavola Birnbaum's lack of questioning of the French scholars' postulation that I find problematic.

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of this approach would be works such as Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (1996) and Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Dark Mothers: African Origins and Godmothers* (2001). In-depth analyses of the contents of such texts will be dealt with in subsequent chapters.

<sup>14</sup> Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy*, Birnbaum, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*. See also <http://darkmother.net/pages.cfm?ID=14&mm=3> Accessed 15/06/2012

<sup>15</sup> Birnbaum, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*. p.117.

<sup>16</sup> Birnbaum, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*. p.149.

<sup>17</sup> Birnbaum, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*. p.135.

Chiavola Birnbaum is happy to acknowledge the significance of black Madonnas in countries such as Germany and Switzerland, which were once ‘centers of hostility to women during the protestant reformation’ but where now ‘the submerged memory of the dark mother is today rising to consciousness.’<sup>18</sup> But it is not entirely clear why Chiavola Birnbaum appears to consider the Protestantism of the United Kingdom so immune from the spread of black women divinities and their potential for feminism when compared to Protestantism on the continent.

This is not to suggest that all generalisation should be abandoned, or that there is no virtue whatsoever in the comparative method. However, the work of researchers who take a more particular approach, focusing their research on a specific shrine or image, demonstrates an alternative way of reading the phenomenon. Jeanette Rodriguez, for example, has looked at the relationship between Mexican-American women and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Although not strictly focusing on black Madonnas, in her work on pilgrimage, Deana Weibel has looked at how pilgrims interpret shrines, including the black Madonna shrines at Rocamadour (see fig.7) and Saintes Maries de la Mer and I return to discuss their works in more detail in the following chapter.<sup>19</sup> I propose to follow this alternative approach rather than aiming for a ‘grand narrative’. By focusing on one particular black Madonna shrine in this thesis, it is hoped that a richer, more nuanced study will be made possible.

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<sup>18</sup> Birnbaum, *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers*. p.145.

<sup>19</sup> For example see Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican-American Women* (2005). Deana Weibel, "The Energy We Call the Goddess: The Religious Creativist Use of a Roman Catholic Shrine.," *Maria* 2.2 (2002), Deana Weibel, "Of Consciousness Changes and Fortified Faith: Creativist and Catholic Pilgrimage at French Catholic Shrines," *Pilgrimage and Healing*, ed. Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2005). Deana Weibel, "The New Age and the Old World: The Interpretation and Use of European Shrines by 'Religious Creatives'." *Maria* 2.2 (2002).

## Theories and Methods

This thesis engages critically with the existing narratives and theories that attempt to explain the origins and symbolic meanings of the black Madonna. In order to provide this critical engagement, I draw on a range of sources. Theories of race and gender exemplified by Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and Janelle Hobson<sup>20</sup> are employed to discuss how the symbol of the black Madonna intersects with those categories and to examine the relationship in the literature between symbolic and literal blackness.

Ronald Hutton and Cynthia Eller<sup>21</sup> both question the construction of past, with particular regards to pre-Christian religious beliefs and the reliance on Jungian psychoanalytic theories. This is important in analysing the literature on black Madonnas, as it is claimed the key to understanding this image may be discovered in looking to these beliefs.

Cynthia Eller's own critique of feminist goddess spirituality's engagement with the black Madonna has also been invaluable in my own research.<sup>22</sup>

I have chosen to situate my research on black Madonnas within the field of 'lived' or 'everyday' religion. David Hall has argued that lived religion as an approach to studying religious practices was influenced by the study, of 'popular religion' – in particular, the the study of religion during the Reformation:

Popular religion has therefore come to signify the space that emerged between official or learned Christianity and profane (or "pagan") culture. In this space lay

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<sup>20</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Turnaround 1992). Janelle Hobson, "'The Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," *Hypatia* 18.4 (2003).

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993). Ronald Hutton, "The Discovery of the Modern Goddess," *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World*, eds. Richard Roberts and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Cynthia Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother," *Religion* 30 (2000).

men and women enjoyed a certain measure of autonomy; here they became actors in their own right, fashioning (or refashioning) religious practices in accordance with local circumstances. Another aspect of this space is that religion encompassed a range of possibilities, some with the sanction of official religion and others not, or perhaps ambiguously so. The concept of popular religion has thus made it possible for historians to expand the scope of belief and practice beyond what was authorized by the institutional church.<sup>23</sup>

According to Hall, such an expansion led to influences from other areas of scholarship on the study of religion. He argues that lived religion has also been influenced by community and congregational studies, ritual studies and cultural or symbolic anthropology.<sup>24</sup> Such an approach is relevant to my research as I am interested in moving away from a purely symbolic approach to understanding black Madonnas. The wider religious contexts of black Madonna shrines and actual practices of worshippers are sometimes overlooked by previous researchers who are more interested in the exotic nature of the black Madonna rather than the everyday religious reality. Instead, I hope my research will locate the image of the black Madonna in the lives of real people.

In this research project I chose a different approach from previous work which has focused on a combination of the origins and symbolic meanings of black Madonnas, psychoanalytic approaches to the phenomenon, or comparative studies of various black Madonnas. Instead I have chosen to use an ethnographic approach to the study of the black Madonna in order to look at a specific black Madonna shrine. Through the use of primary data gathered from observation, interview and archival material and an

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<sup>23</sup> David D. Hall, "Introduction," Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.viii.

<sup>24</sup> Hall, "Introduction." pp.x-xi.

interdisciplinary methodological approach, this research hopes to offer new insights into the relationship between the figure of the black Madonna and the everyday religious lives of worshippers at a particular shrine.

The focus for my work in terms of actual shrines is the black Madonna at St Mary's Church, Willesden, North West London. There are several reasons for choosing this particular shrine. As the example from Chiavola Birnbaum shows, much of the literature available on black Madonnas has concentrated on those found on the continent. This is in part due to the large numbers of shrines found on the Continent. But is also because of the nature of the research on black Madonnas and how this has developed. As Boss has argued,<sup>25</sup> the earliest attempts at trying to explain black Madonnas came from French scholars, who tended to concentrate on the black Madonnas in France and French black Madonnas in particular and have been linked to the wilder theories that surround these images. Because many Marian shrines in the United Kingdom were destroyed during the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible that there were once more black Madonnas here. The few images identified as black Madonnas that currently exist in the United Kingdom have been relatively under-researched.<sup>26</sup>

To my knowledge, there had been no previous study of this shrine using ethnographic methods. Any mention of St Mary's in the existing literature was largely from a historical perspective such as in the work of Gary Waller<sup>27</sup> or from guide books to shrines in the UK, or in local history publications. There was a description of St Mary's

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<sup>25</sup> Boss, "Black Madonnas." p.461

<sup>26</sup> Begg provides a list of what he considers black Madonnas in the United Kingdom. See Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Waller, The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).



in Begg's work on black Madonnas but this too was more interested in the foundations of the shrine than how people experience the church now.<sup>28</sup>

The history of the shrine and the black Madonna has been questioned by local historians and the current statue at the shrine is a relatively recent creation having been made in 1972. St Mary's is an Anglican rather than a Roman Catholic Church. Whilst this is not a theological research project, the place of Mary in the Anglican tradition needs to be kept in mind here and it is in this context that the black Madonna shrine at St Mary's should be considered. All of these aspects present a researcher with further interesting questions to be explore.

I examine some of the questions raised by my research in the context of a local Christian community situated in an ethnically diverse part of London. Although some of the existing literature discusses rituals, practices and beliefs associated with the shrines, there is an absence of the voices of worshippers. It is therefore possible that a gap exists between the speculative theories on the meanings of black Madonnas and the actual experiences of the worshippers. By engaging with the congregation of a shrine, my research begins to bridge this gap and make an interesting and original contribution to this field of study.

### **Background and description of St Mary's Church and Shrine**

St Mary's is situated in a busy, urban area of North West London. The church (see fig.8) lies at the intersection of two busy main roads, at the junction of Neasden Lane and the A407. On opposite sides the church is the magistrate's court, another housing estate and

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<sup>28</sup> See Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin. p.267 This description is quoted in part in chapter four of this thesis.

the local street market and shops. The church is set back from the roads and in front of a local housing estate. The church grounds surround the building with graves and monuments to one side and a large expanse of green on the other which leads up to the primary school. This section of green is home to the war memorial. A small road leads off of the main Neasden Lane towards the church. On the opposite side of the lane are the two church cottages. The design of the church, the oldest parts of which date to the 13<sup>th</sup> century give it the look one would expect from a country village church, not one found in a modern urban setting.

Entering through the south door, there is a small porch with a notice board. On entering the church, to the left is the font (see fig.9) which is dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century where baptisms take place and from where holy water is distributed during pilgrimage. At the far western end is another door in and out of the church, although this did appear to be used as regularly as the south one. Above the western end is a gallery which houses the church organ.

On the right hand side of the south door is a table with leaflets and information sheets and another notice board. Here people can write the names of those they wish to be remembered in prayers. In the central part of the church, there is a north and south aisle that run the length of the church. There are no pews. Instead chairs are arranged in a circular pattern. In the middle is the altar used for services on main services. At the eastern end of the south aisle is the smaller Chantry Chapel dedicated to St Katherine. In this chapel is now a statue of St Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary.

At the corner where the Chantry Chapel and the Nave meet is the statue of the black Madonna on a wooden plinth. There are candles available to light and place in front of

the statue. The statue is angled so the Madonna and Christ child look out over the congregation at worship. On the opposite corner of the Nave, is a stone fountain into which the water comes up from the holy well. There are chairs on either side of the Nave, with the high altar at the end. In the Nave there is another Madonna and child. This one is painted gold and was introduced into the church in 1902 (see fig.10). It was originally plain wood but was gilded in the course of church renovations in the 1960s. When I attended weekday services where there were fewer people, these services often took place here. In the north eastern corner is a door leading to the vestry and a small room where tea and coffee are served after services.

The church is in the London Borough of Brent, now one of the most diverse boroughs in London and St Mary's shares the local area with other faiths. For example, the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, popularly known as the Neasden Temple, is close by. There are various other denominations of churches in the area – such as the Roman Catholic Our Lady of Willesden, Willesden Green Baptist Church and the Pentecostal Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – as well as several other Anglican churches besides St Mary's.

The diversity of the local area is reflected in the congregation. There are members whose families are more recent residents having originated in the Caribbean, Africa and India. There were also white members of the congregation who had come from the Republic of Ireland and from mainland Europe. Members, both black and white, had lived in the local area for many years, some more than seventy. At the services I attended, there were a significantly higher number of women than men attending, both during the week and at weekends.

The overall number of people who came to worship at the church whilst I was there conducting fieldwork varied. Some weeks there would be as few as forty people at the main Sunday morning worship. Other weeks there was almost double this. The numbers were swelled when there was a child's christening as family members and friends who were not normally part of the congregation came to celebrate.

There were significantly less worshippers to the weekday services. Wednesday mornings where there would be a service followed by tea and coffee, between ten and fifteen people would attend. The attendees to this service were largely drawn from the older members of the congregation who were retired and therefore able to attend in the day. This was occasionally supplemented by other younger members when they had time off work or during the school holidays, although it was unusual for children to attend in the week. Overall there was a wide age range in the church and some people attended with three generations of the same family. After I had finished my fieldwork, but still periodically went to visit, a regular attendance by children at St Mary's primary school adjacent to the church had been introduced.

## **Overview of thesis**

Chapter one provides an overview and discussion of a selection of the existing literature on black Madonnas. Chapter two explains the methodological and theoretical underpinning of the study. It gives the reasons as to why the particular methods were chosen and discusses some of the wider issues of conducting ethnographic research such as the subjectivity of the researcher and ethical considerations. Chapter three examines in more detail some of the issues raised in the literature review. It focuses on the explanations offered as to the origins and meanings of the black Madonna and the

problems these raise. It looks at how the black Madonna becomes separated from the Virgin Mary and how this leads to an 'othering' of the black Madonna. This is examined in the context of theories of race and gender.

Chapter four is the first chapter in which the fieldwork at St Mary's is examined.

This chapter focuses on the historical narratives of the shrine that have been created and the relationship the congregation have with these narratives. It also questions how history is used and what this means when trying to explore the narratives attached to the shrine.

Chapter five looks at the place of the Virgin Mary in St Mary's. Given the problems identified in earlier chapters, it considers the place of the black Madonna together with the Virgin Mary, rather than seeing them as separate figures. It considers the wider Marian devotions that take place in the church and whether these pose any problems for an Anglican congregation. This chapter also looks at the issues surrounding blackness and the black Madonna at St Mary's.

Chapter six examines a broader range of religious devotions and experiences in the church, further utilising the methodological approach of lived or everyday religion. This is important because it places a black Madonna in wider religious context, in the case of this research, a local Anglican parish church. The chapter considers the journeys, literal and spiritual, people have taken in order to get to St Mary's and discusses the ways in which people engage with their faith. The seventh and final chapter focuses on pilgrimage day at St Mary's. Pilgrimage is an important celebration in the church. The chapter considers the links between the current pilgrimage and the church's history. It looks at how pilgrimage can be used as a public demonstration of Christianity in a multi cultural, multi faith part of London. This chapter looks at the way in Marian symbolism

is used during pilgrimage and considers the place of the Virgin Mary in the pilgrimage celebrations. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the main findings.

## **Chapter One - Black Madonnas: History, Theory and Hypothesis**

This chapter presents an examination of some of the literature available on black Madonnas. I realize that by only including a relatively small sample of the wide range of texts available I have been selective in my choices, but what I have tried to do is to include a representative range of different approaches and theories in my selection. The books and articles surveyed here are relevant to my research in several ways. Firstly, some of the works discussed here, such as those by Monique Scheer and Jeanette Rodriguez, have been useful in developing methodological and theoretical frameworks for my research. Secondly, there were issues raised by the more interpretive, psychoanalytical approaches to black Madonnas, also discussed in this chapter that I wanted to address in the course of my research. I conclude the chapter by introducing what my own research contributes in light of this discussion.

### **Historical and Anthropological Approaches**

#### **i) Early studies**

This overview begins by considering the studies which are generally considered to be the earliest modern academic research on the phenomenon of the black Madonna. These came from France in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>29</sup> Marie Durand-Lefèbvre's work, *Etude Sur L'Origine des Vierges Noires*, was published in 1937. Her work consisted of a catalogue

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<sup>29</sup> Emille Saillens, *Nos Vierges Noires: Leurs Origines* 1945. An earlier work upon which Saillens based his work was *Etude Sur L'origine Des Vierges Noires* by Marie Durand-Lefèbvre published in 1937. As yet I have been unable to locate copies of these texts either in the original French or translated into English.

that included paintings and copies of statues. Although largely concerned with black Madonnas in France, Durand-Lefèbvre also included information on the black Madonnas of Einsiedeln in Switzerland and Loreto in Italy. According to Ean Begg, Durand-Lefèbvre's work suggested that there was 'iconographical and cultic continuity between pagan goddesses and the Black Virgins.'<sup>30</sup>

Although he began his work in the 1930s, Emile Saillens' work *Nos Vierges Noires, Leurs Origines* was not published until 1945. The office of the publisher responsible for his work was bombed during the Second World War and many copies of the manuscript were destroyed, with only a limited number surviving.<sup>31</sup> Saillens's work contained a 'valuable catalogue of places in France that possess or have possessed a statuette of a black Virgin with a summary of information using abbreviations about each entry, as well as a number of useful maps'<sup>32</sup>. Saillens suggests that the colour of the black Madonna must have some deeper meaning beyond an artistic representation of Mary as a dark-skinned woman: 'In popular imagination, Mary was blonde. So if people attached such great value to these portraits, it cannot be because of their faithful likeness, but because their appearance aged and furthermore, caused Mary to resemble deities whose memory was still cherished.'<sup>33</sup> In this respect, both Durand-Lefèbvre and Saillens see the origins of the black Madonna in the pre-Christian goddesses who were sometimes represented as black. This suggestion proved to be an influential one in the work of subsequent researchers.

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<sup>30</sup> Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari, "In Quest of the Black Virgin: She Is Black Because She Is Black," *Mother Worship: Themes and Variations*, ed. James. J. Preston (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1982). p.58.

<sup>32</sup> Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*. 1996, p.4.

<sup>33</sup> Saillens quoted in Jean Markale, *Cathedral of the Black Madonna: The Druids and the Mysteries of Chartres* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 2004). Original 1988 French edition published by Editions Pygmalion/Gerard Watelet, Paris. The 2004 edition is used in my research.

## ii) The work of Moss and Cappannari

The work of anthropologists Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari was some of the earliest research written in English and extended the study of the phenomenon to Italy. In 1953, their original paper 'The Black Madonna: An example of culture borrowing' was published in *The Scientific Monthly* publication. Their work suggested that black Madonnas fall into three categories:

- 1) Madonnas that reflect the colour of the indigenous population of worshippers.  
This included statues such as Our Lady of Guadalupe and other black Madonnas found in South America and Africa.
- 2) Secondly, there are some images that may become dark due to physical factors, such as ageing of wood, paints, etc. Or they may have suffered environmental damage such as fire.
- 3) The third category, into which the majority of black Madonnas in Western Europe seem to fall, are those for which there appears no obvious explanation for their blackness. It is this third category that the majority of literature on black Madonnas concentrates on.

Moss and Cappannari suggested that these black Madonnas were an example of cultural borrowing. By this they meant that black Madonnas were a Christianised version of earlier deities worshipped throughout Europe. These deities included Isis, Demeter and Cybele, all of whom were represented as black in colour:



The adoption of new beliefs is facilitated when the beliefs can be equated in some fashion with the older and compatible experiences. It is in this light that we offer our hypothesis that these Madonnas exemplify a reinterpretation of pagan customs, that they have functioned as aids in the preservation of continuity in the transition from pagan beliefs to Roman Catholicism.<sup>34</sup>

In a later paper, Moss and Cappannari describe what happened when they tried to present their original findings at a conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The paper received a hostile reaction and every nun and priest in the audience walked out:

We were confused by the hostile reaction of the religious members of our original audience. The confusion was clarified immediately after publication: the chaplain of the Newman Club at Wayne State University gave a sermon in which he fulminated against the campus atheists who would defile the name of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>35</sup>

Moss and Cappannari also consider the connection between the *Song of Songs* in the Old Testament where the female voice of the beloved describes herself: 'I am black but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem'. An explicit link between the black Madonna and these words is made at the black Madonna shrine in Tindari, as the words appear on her statue (See fig.12). As Moss and Cappannari point out, the *Song of Songs* has been subject to many interpretations by both Jewish and Christian scholars. However, in terms of its relationship to black Madonnas, Moss and Cappannari do not expand on the extent

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<sup>34</sup> Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari, "The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing," The Scientific Monthly 73 (1953). pp.319-324.

<sup>35</sup> Moss and Cappannari, 1982, p.55.

to which this piece may have influenced the colour of the black Madonna.<sup>36</sup> Moss and Cappannari's work has inspired other writers and researchers. Much of the work that has followed on from Moss and Cappannari has continued to see black Madonnas in terms of their pre-Christian origins. Since Moss and Cappannari published their original article in the 1950s, there has been a growth in literature on black Madonnas, clearly influenced by their work. Moss and Cappannari's overall conclusions, that some black Madonnas may be the Christianised version of pre-Christian, is plausible enough. However there are some aspects of their work that begin to raise the questions to which I shall return throughout this thesis.

I would argue that the categorisation they employed may lead to the dismissal of images that might well be worth researching, including the black Madonna at St Mary's in Willesden. Investigations into images that fall into Moss and Cappannari's first two categories might not result in any challenge to their widely accepted explanations for black Madonnas but there may well be other valid reasons for doing so. If one were to investigate their first category, such as those Madonnas in Africa and South America, perhaps one would still find a link to pre-Christian deities, indeed this is precisely the claim made for Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. However, by dismissing this category, issues such as the colonial imposition of Christianity on indigenous populations are not addressed. By ignoring Madonnas who have been blackened by age or other physical factors, no explanations are offered as to whether their blackness remains significant to those who worship at such a shrine.

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<sup>36</sup> More in-depth study on the origins and meanings attributed to the *Song of Songs* include: Marvin. H. Pope, The Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Doubleday Anchor Bible Series, vol. 7C (New York, London: Doubleday, 1977). Marcia Falk, The Song of Songs: Love Lyrics from the Bible - a New Translation (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993). Raphael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess, 3rd Enlarged Edition ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990).

The second issue raised by Moss and Cappannari's work is that of symbolic versus literal blackness. In the course of their original article, they quote sources (all of them pre-20<sup>th</sup> century) that describe encounters with various black Madonnas across Europe. The reactions of these writers to the black Madonnas are worth quoting here. English author and travel writer Henry Swinburne, writing in 1783, states: 'There are in Italy and elsewhere some dozens of black, ugly Madonnas, which all pass for the work of his hands, and as such are revered'.<sup>37</sup> Archbishop John Hamilton, writing in 1552, writes: 'These statues darkened into something not far from idolatry...when...one image of the Virgin (generally a black or ugly one) was regarded...as more powerful for the help of suppliants'.<sup>38</sup>

Moss and Cappannari do not make any comment regarding these descriptions. Perhaps they felt that these descriptions were merely aesthetic and should not be construed as having any racist connotations and in any case it is impossible to ascertain the real meaning behind these descriptions. Nevertheless, the use of the words 'black' and 'ugly' in the description of the black Madonna is uncomfortable to say the least. The tone of both descriptions is one of distaste and disapproval at the reverence accorded the Black Madonna.

The issue of racism in relation to the black Madonna was raised after the publication of their initial article. Correspondence in the letters page of *Scientific Monthly* following this article further illuminates Moss and Cappannari's reluctance to discuss these comments. Marguerite Cartwright, writing from Hunter College in New York, suggests

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<sup>37</sup> Moss and Cappannari, "The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing." p.323

<sup>38</sup> Moss and Cappannari, "The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing." p.323

that the reason for the 'conscious effort to deny, obliterate, deface, paint, and destroy' the black Madonna may be racism: 'The relationship between power and fear is undeniable. A fear that antedates recorded history is still upon us. In its modern form, it is the cult of racism. For the basic component of prejudices against darker human beings is fear.'<sup>39</sup>

Moss and Cappannari reply that whilst they 'find Miss Cartwright's observations interesting' they disagree with her suggestion of racism:

However, we make specific mention in our article that the Madonnas under examination are not Negroid. Rather, the Negroid madonnas can be explained by an alternative hypothesis, as an attempt to anthropomorphize the Virgin. The extension of our remarks in the statement by Miss Cartwright is unwarranted by the data presented in our article. A careful examination of the data reveals that the evidence does not lend itself to the conclusions made by Miss Cartwright.<sup>40</sup>

For Moss and Cappannari, it would seem that black Madonnas cannot be analysed in terms of race as their blackness is symbolic rather than literal. Most subsequent writers on black Madonnas who refer to Moss and Cappannari's work do not mention this discussion in *Scientific Monthly* and simply choose to concentrate on the syncretism and mystery of the black Madonna. In this sense, although Moss and Cappannari's work is a scholarly attempt to understand the black Madonna, I would also argue that at the same

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<sup>39</sup> Marguerite Cartwright, "Modern Cult of Racism and the Black Madonna," *Scientific Monthly* 77 (1953). p.222.

<sup>40</sup> Leonard Moss and Stephen Cappannari, "Modern Cult of Racism and the Black Madonna," *Scientific Monthly* 77 (1953). p.222.

time, the theories they developed have in fact contributed to the mythologizing of the black Madonna.

### **iii) Subsequent historical and anthropological works**

It is the historical context of the black Madonna that Monique Scheer addresses in her article 'From Majesty to Mystery'. Scheer attempts to seek explanations for the colour of the black Madonna in the meanings and interpretations given to these images over time. Her research concentrates on black Madonnas from German-speaking areas of Western Europe that have been under-researched in the past. Scheer questions the portrayal of French black Madonnas as the epitome of such images, suggesting the extensive French scholarship of the likes of Durand-LeFevre, Emile Saillens and Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet on the phenomenon as contributing to this idea.

Scheer argues that although some black Madonna images date back to the Middle Ages, there is no evidence they were widely perceived as black at that time. By the eighteenth century, the development of theories of race in scientific discourses: 'undermines dramatically the plausibility of pious interpretations and thus contributes to the modern notion that the madonnas must have become black by accident'<sup>41</sup>. She points out that the influence of the 'accidental' theory of the colour of the black Madonna has meant that in the past, scholars have largely ignored the significance of these images. Scheer is also sceptical of researchers who emphasise the intentionality of colour:

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<sup>41</sup>Monique Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries," *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002), Accessed 09/09/2005 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.5/ah052001412.html>>. pp.6-7.

Those who argue that the colour was intentional tend to place so much emphasis on the colour alone, on its 'mystery and power,' that one begins to wonder why anyone venerated a white image of Mary at all. Many attributes characterised by this school as unique to black Madonnas are, in fact, equally represented among images of Mary never considered black – since these scholars hardly look for meanings of these images from within the cult of Mary, they do not notice this.<sup>42</sup>

In Scheer's opinion, what proponents of both the continuity theory and the accidental theory of black Madonnas have missed, are the 'meanings of blackness of images of Mary for worshippers and the transformation of those meanings over time.'<sup>43</sup> Scheer argues that a lack of written records makes it impossible for us to know what the aesthetic effect of a black Madonna would have been on early modern worshippers. However, the legends surrounding black Madonnas might contribute to our understanding of 'where the blackness of the image would have fit in for the common worshippers, that is, what sense would have been made of it.'<sup>44</sup>

Scheer suggests that in the context of the Germanic black Madonnas (which her research focuses on), the use of legends to authenticate of the image became important. She explains that during the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits were given the task of '(re)establishing pilgrimage sites, processional activities, congregations and sodalities dedicated to specific Marian cults.'<sup>45</sup> There was an attempt to promote the veneration of

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<sup>42</sup>Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries." pp.6-7.

<sup>43</sup>Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries." p.7.

<sup>44</sup>Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries." p.15.

<sup>45</sup>Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries." p.17. In this instance sodality means a lay ecclesial organization.

images as way of distinguishing from, and in opposition to, Protestantism and Reformation iconoclasm. This, Scheer believes, has potentially important consequences for historical research on all black Madonnas. It is possible that the re-introduction of older traditions meant that substantial weight was given to an 'idealised Middle Ages' during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Black Madonnas 'came to embody this imagined medieval tradition.'<sup>46</sup>

Scheer suggests that such legends helped to reinforce the authenticity of the black Madonna in several ways. Firstly, the notion of antiquity helped to reinforce the belief that the older an image, the closer it was to the 'real' Mary. Secondly, there was a popular legend that St Luke painted the 'true portrait' of Mary and this became associated with some black Madonnas (although this was not an exclusive association as St. Luke was thought to be responsible for many images of Mary). Thirdly, images of the black Madonna were believed to have been brought back from the Holy Land by the crusaders, or early pilgrims such as St. Helena. Their dark colour was the result of wood such as ebony or cedar that came from the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore: 'The colour served as a visual metaphor for authenticity, augmenting the message of the legend motifs and supporting them in their legitimising function, and ultimately, proving useful in cult promotion.'<sup>47</sup>

In terms of theological interpretations of black Madonnas, Scheer argues that:

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<sup>46</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries."p.18.

<sup>47</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries."p.15.

On one level, placing these images in the interpretative context of the Song of Songs connects them with a longstanding exegetical tradition of identifying Mary with the Church, the Bride of Christ. On another, “I am black but beautiful” was useful as an interpretive aid to bridge over the grave dissonance felt between blackness/sinfulness and beauty/virtue, as in the iconography of black skin in religious art, as well as to counteract negative connotations of the colour in the folk traditions.<sup>48</sup>

In Scheer’s opinion, the change in perception of the black Madonnas is one of ‘transition from sacred object to work of art.’<sup>49</sup> However, she also argues that it is not simply because black Madonnas were perceived as African that they lost their sanctity:

the loss of their aura helped bring a non-religious strata of meaning to the fore, most forcibly, a secularised notion of accurate representation and the question of race. The idea of a black Madonna as possibly African was not disturbing enough to cause any reference to it until the early nineteenth century, and then it was primarily among those for whom sacred meanings were invalid – rationalist, even anti-Catholic, intellectuals.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries."p.16.

<sup>49</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries."p.25.

<sup>50</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries."p.25.



Scheer makes the point that the presentation of black Madonnas as ‘mysterious’ in much of the literature today ‘has to do with the modern inability to see past skin-colour-as-race, or to paraphrase Zygmunt Bauman, with the modern mind’s intolerance of ambiguity.’<sup>51</sup>

Scheer finishes her article by suggesting that the (re)sacralisation of the black Madonna by the New Age movement takes ‘the (ethnically coded) blackness of the Madonna as the necessary starting point.’<sup>52</sup> Scheer points out that as her work focuses on a specific subset of black Madonnas, her theories may not be applicable to black Madonnas from other regions. However, the points she does make are interesting, particularly those regarding the invention and re-invention of traditions. Also helpful is her suggestion that we need to examine the meanings and interpretations given to black Madonnas in order to help us understand their significance. Scheer traces these meanings and interpretations as far back as the nineteenth century, and I would like to take these suggestions further, into the present, by looking at more current meanings and interpretations of the black Madonna. Below, I introduce some of the more popular literature on black Madonnas and in subsequent chapters will discuss this in light of Scheer’s above suggestions.

Malgorzata Olesziewicz-Peralba takes a comparative, anthropological approach to the study of black Madonnas. Her research encompasses black Madonnas in both Europe and Latin America. Olesziewicz-Peralba examines how different religious traditions are woven together in syncretic fashion and looks at how religious images are used in ‘postmodern global spaces.’<sup>53</sup> She explores several themes in her research. Firstly, the

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<sup>51</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries." p.25.

<sup>52</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries."p.26.

<sup>53</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation. p.1.

syncretism of sacred symbols and the black Madonna is given as an example of the syncretism of sacred symbols. Olesziewicz-Peralba defines syncretism as:

an attribute of all evolving societies and a natural consequence of dynamic cultural contact. It occurs during millennia of evolution of cultures, even those considered stable and bound to one particular area. Christianity is a good example of the syncretic processes, as it has absorbed a gamut of preexistent beliefs and practices, incorporating them into its symbols and rituals.<sup>54</sup>

Secondly, for Olesziewicz-Peralba, the black Madonna functions not only as a symbol of 'matriarchal beliefs and religious practices, but also as a symbol of national identity.'<sup>55</sup> In Poland, the black Madonna's functions:

go beyond religion, as she has also been a symbol of national identity and justice that has accompanied Poles throughout their history of struggles for freedom and independence. Her worship is still very vital and is being reinvigorated by adopting new functions in response to the demands of changing contemporary contexts.<sup>56</sup>

In Mexico, Our Lady of Guadalupe 'also carries complex layers of meaning'<sup>57</sup>: 'As an icon born on the soil of the Americas that bears characteristics of two main cultural and

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<sup>54</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation. p.16.

<sup>55</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation. p.1.

<sup>56</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation. p.47.

<sup>57</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation. p.79.

ethnic groups inhabiting Mexico, the Indian and the European, she is transformed into an important national and patriotic symbol.’<sup>58</sup>

Oleszkiewicz-Peralba is also interested in the ‘appropriation and use of the Madonna in various unexpected forms as an example of cultural transformations and hybridity in postmodern times.’<sup>59</sup> She examines the ways in which the image of Guadalupe has been reinvented in cultural forms such as street murals, tattoos, t-shirts and by artists who have ‘liberated’ Guadalupe: ‘from her static pose, she is transformed into a truly active woman who works, walks, dances, jogs, even practices martial arts.’<sup>60</sup>

What makes Oleszkiewicz-Peralba’s research particularly interesting is her demonstration of how cultures use and adapt a religious symbol. Although she does look at the past origins of the black Madonna, it is her focus on the use of this symbol in the modern world and her use of empirical research that makes her work so informative. Although ostensibly about the figure of the black Madonna, her work also generates data and questions about wider issues of the use of religious symbols in different cultures, the exchange of ideas between cultures and the subversion of traditional religious imagery. This is useful from the perspective of my own research. I too wanted to examine how the black Madonna was adapted and used by a particular community.

Rather than taking a comparative approach, other researchers have chosen to concentrate on one particular black Madonna image and/or shrine. The figure of Our Lady of

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<sup>58</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation, p.79.

<sup>59</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation, p.1.

<sup>60</sup> Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation, p.154.

Guadalupe for example, has been the subject of numerous studies, using different methodological approaches.<sup>61</sup> For the purposes of my own research, the most pertinent is Jeanette Rodriguez's study of Guadalupe, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women*. Rodriguez describes the purpose of her research as follows:

Struck by the prominence of the feminine image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexican-American culture and concerned with the ways in which Mexican-American women might relate to and identify with this image, I set out to study its effect on their lives and identities. I chose to do an exploratory study that would identify these women's perception of Our Lady of Guadalupe and describe the nature of the relationship between them – the first step in understanding how Our Lady of Guadalupe influences the daily existence of Mexican-American women.<sup>62</sup>

Rodriguez uses primary data she collected from questionnaires, written reflections and interviews to provide a picture of individual women and their religious lives. She not only puts the image of Guadalupe in its political and historical context, but also considers the cultural and political forces that may have shaped the experiences of the women who take part in her study. This gives her research a deeper layer of understanding of the responses of her interviewees. Describing one section of her research, Rodriguez writes:

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<sup>61</sup> See for example: Ena Campbell, "The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Female Self-Image: A Mexican Case History," *Mother Worship: Themes and Variations*, ed. James J. Preston, Studies in Religion (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). David Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe Image and Tradition across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Valentina Napolitano, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Nexus of Effect," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009).

<sup>62</sup> Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women*. p.xxvii.

This chapter focuses on the psychosocial religious reality and the assumptive world of contemporary Mexican-American women, using their history as a springboard. These women are not only the product of a mixture of Spanish and indigenous roots ( the Mexican culture, *mestizaje*) but also of the Anglo-American which has traditionally dominated life in the United States. Mexican-American women are thus *mestiza* twice over, ethnically and culturally. In addition we cannot ignore the influence of Christianity itself. Our Lady of Guadalupe as an essentially *mestiza* figure may serve as a symbol that embodies this multiculturalism.<sup>63</sup>

Rodriguez's work is relevant to my own because it shows not only how one might conduct research on a single black Madonna rather than trying to conduct comparative work on several images, but also it demonstrates how one might incorporate the views of worshippers on research on black Madonnas. It shows how individuals use a particular religious image, and their relationship with this image.

The final set of works considered in this section comes from anthropologist Deana Weibel. Weibel's work explores how people of different religious perspectives experience and interpret a shrine. The first two studies include research conducted on pilgrims to black Madonna shrines and the way in which pilgrims reinterpret these shrines to fit in with their 'Goddess-orientated spirituality'.<sup>64</sup> The final study looks at experiences at Lourdes as well as the black Madonna shrine of Rocamadour. In this paper, Weibel compares the experiences of 'religious creatives' with those of more traditional Roman Catholic pilgrims. Finding the term 'New Age' too vague and often

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<sup>63</sup> Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women. p.xxxi. The term 'mestiza' refers to a woman of mixed heritage.

<sup>64</sup> Weibel, "The New Age and the Old World: The Interpretation and Use of European Shrines by 'Religious Creatives'". p.80.

used in a derogatory fashion, Weibel describes those in her study as ‘religious creatives’, whom she defines as:

Westerners who see mind, body and spirit as a single system, who see the earth as sacred, and who seek authenticity and novel experience. Religious creatives tend to believe that “all religions are true,” and feel free about picking and choosing among spiritual traditions as though they were modular structures capable of being taken apart and reassembled in pleasing new forms to accommodate individual, personal values.<sup>65</sup>

To briefly summarise this section, it would appear that the early suggestions made regarding the pre-Christian origins of the black Madonna have had some influence over subsequent writings. Although initially concentrating on France, the study of black Madonnas was widened by the anthropological studies of Moss and Cappannari. From a more general, historical perspective, Monique Scheer attempted to examine the black Madonna’s significance and how this image might be interpreted as well as trying to explain the origins of their colour. More recent works by Olesziewicz-Peralba and Weibel have shown these origins to be important not only in terms of a shrine’s history, but also in the ways in which current worshippers and pilgrims may interpret it. The following section will try to demonstrate how the above ideas have been expanded upon and how the symbolic aspects of the black Madonna have come to prominence.

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<sup>65</sup> Weibel, "Of Consciousness Changes and Fortified Faith: Creativist and Catholic Pilgrimage at French Catholic Shrines." p.114.

## **Interpretative Studies of the Black Madonna<sup>66</sup>**

This section is divided into three. The first section includes research on what might be labelled as psycho-spiritual symbolism. Such research has been, in part, influenced by Jungian concepts such as archetypes and the interpretation of symbols. Fred Gustafson and Ean Begg both hold qualifications from the C G Jung Institute in Zurich and their work reflects this. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, whose work on goddesses includes black Madonnas, are analytical psychologists.

The second part examines research that is also on the symbolic but focuses more on the political and liberational aspects of the symbolism of the black Madonna. This research comes mostly from feminist writers, in particular those interested in feminist spirituality. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum initially concentrated on Black Madonnas of Italy but her more recent work has moved beyond this to incorporate a study of the origins of the black Madonna in Africa.

The third part looks at the literature on black Madonnas that extends beyond and against mainstream Christianity. In this literature, black Madonnas are now seen as part of an esoteric and unorthodox tradition that has run parallel, often in direct conflict with mainstream Christianity.

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<sup>66</sup> Other writers who have mentioned the symbolism of the black Madonna in their writings, without this being the central focus of their work would include: Nancy Qualls-Corbett, The Sacred Prostitute: Eternal Aspects of the Feminine (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1988). Elinor Gaddon, The Once and Future Goddess (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1990). Roger Horrocks, "The Divine Woman in Christianity," The Absent Mother: Restoring the Goddess to Judaism and Christianity (London: Mandala Books, 1991).

**i) Psycho-spiritual symbolism**

Ean Begg's *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, first published in 1985, was influenced by Moss and Cappanari and has, in turn, influenced other works. One of the most important aspects of Begg's book was to include a gazetteer of as many Black Madonna sites as possible, the emphasis being on shrines found in Western Europe, as Begg tried to visit all the places listed. The gazetteer was updated in later editions of the book to include black Madonnas beyond Western Europe, although he had not been able to visit all of those new sites listed; the details of many of the sites outside Western Europe were provided by readers of previous editions of his book.

In his initial research, Begg discovered around 450 images 'not counting those in Africa south of the Mediterranean littoral, which have been called black, dark brown or grey.'<sup>67</sup> Begg's work is detailed and wide-ranging in tracing the pre-Christian origins of black Madonnas. He examines possible influences from several pre-Christian traditions – the classical tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, the Celtic and Teutonic tradition and the ancient Near East, including Egypt. He cites the influence of deities such as Isis, Diana, Cybele and Demeter, all of whom were portrayed as black. He also looks at some perhaps less well-known deities such as Anath from ancient Syria; Rosamerta, a Celtic/Teutonic goddess whose worship was popular in Gaul; and Sekhmet, the destructive warrior goddess from ancient Egypt.

Begg applies psychoanalytic theories to a wide range of traditions and assumes they have all had some influence over the symbolic meaning of the black Madonna. This would

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<sup>67</sup> Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*.p.3.



appear to be regardless of any archaeological and historical evidence. Begg's work relies heavily on his interpretations of myths from these different cultures. Influenced by Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious and the archetype, he moves beyond seeing direct links from pre-Christian to Christian in the location of black Madonna shrines, and examines more closely the symbolic aspects of black Madonnas. Emphasis is placed on the difference between the more orthodox white Madonna and what the black Madonna represents:

The return of the Black Virgin to the forefront of collective consciousness has coincided with the profound psychological need to reconcile sexuality and religion. She has always helped her supplicants to circumvent the rigidities of patriarchal legislation and is traditionally on the side of physical processes.<sup>68</sup>

Begg argues that black Madonnas are not only pre-Christian in origin but their cult is part of a heretical tradition within Christianity itself and it is this, as much as their pre-Christian origins, which helps to explain the Church's rather negative attitude to a phenomenon that includes some of its most famous and popular shrines:

The cult has inevitably suffered since the Second Vatican Council, from the prevailing animus against 'non-historical orthodoxy' and in favour of biblical truth and simplicity of worship. But another reason for clerical lack of enthusiasm when faced with the enduring popularity of the Black Virgins may owe

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<sup>68</sup> Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin.p.28.

something, not merely to liturgical trends but to suspicion of the sort of people who are attracted by the phenomenon.<sup>69</sup>

According to Begg, these included the writer J K Huysmans, who caused outrage in his 1891 novel *Las Bas (Down There)* by describing a black mass. Not, Begg points out, the sort of people to 'allay clerical hesitancy towards Black Virgin fanciers.'<sup>70</sup> Begg's work then moves beyond a study of the symbolism of the black Madonna and concentrates more on the black Madonna as part of this 'hidden tradition'. I will return to this aspect of Begg's work in more detail in a subsequent section.

Originally written as his diploma thesis in 1973 and later published in 1990, Gustafson's *The Black Madonna* is a partly a study of the black Madonna in Einsiedeln but then goes on to explore the wider symbolism of black Madonnas generally. Gustafson explains that although the original statue of the Madonna at Einsiedeln was white and over the years darkened as a result of candle smoke from the votive candles at the shrine, when attempts were made to restore the statue to its original whiteness, this provoked an outcry from the congregation who had become attached to her in her blackened state. Gustafson suggests that symbolic meaning had become associated with this blackness:

It is beyond argument that the Black Madonna of Einsiedeln has had a tremendous impact on her worshippers, past and present. I have never seen the chapel empty of worshippers on my many trips there... Like other black goddesses of Europe, she is associated with healing ability and miracle working. This is usually more common among the Black Virgins than among their white

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<sup>69</sup> Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*. p.11.

<sup>70</sup> Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*.. p.12.

counterparts, a fact which accords with the dark, creative and healing forces which lie in the unconscious.<sup>71</sup>

A graduate of the C G Jung Institute in Zurich, Gustafson found that the image of the black Madonna appeared in dreams of analysands he worked with. Gustafson sees black Madonnas as symbolic of a 'femininity that is dark and acts as the matrix of all creativity and renewal.'<sup>72</sup> He looks at black Madonnas in relation to other dark or black goddess figures and sees the same elements in both images. This feminine aspect has been 'relegated to a functionally inferior position in our patriarchal culture':

Yet the feminine is always there and must express itself. It is not beyond reason that part of the explanation why the Madonna is black is precisely this demeaned position; by her blackness, she seems to compensate the cultural one-sidedness which places more value on intellect and reason and conscious conquests than it does the deep mysterious processes of the soul. Her blackness boldly accentuates this defect and in so doing, seems to stimulate individuals to a consciousness of her rightful place.<sup>73</sup>

Gustafson also edits a more recent collection of essays entitled *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine*<sup>74</sup> which explores this archetype. These essays are diverse in their interpretation of the 'dark feminine' and cover a range of cultural representations of this archetype. These include Lilith, Morrigan, Kali and Mary

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<sup>71</sup> Fred Gustafson, *The Black Madonna* (Boston: Sigo Press Ltd, 1990). pp.68-69.

<sup>72</sup> Gustafson, *The Black Madonna*. p.112.

<sup>73</sup> Gustafson, *The Black Madonna*. p.113.

<sup>74</sup> Fred Gustafson (Ed), *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine* (Berwick: Nicholas Hays Inc., 2003).

Magdalene as well as the black Madonna. In his introduction, Gustafson explains what might be meant by the 'dark feminine':

we are only now beginning to become conscious of what is the side of the feminine archetype that cannot, nor does it even necessarily desire to, fit into the existing cultural structures. That other side has best been described as the Dark Feminine.<sup>75</sup>

Those essays in *The Moonlit Path* that focus on the black Madonna concur as to her meanings. For this group of writers, the black Madonna is just one of many 'dark' goddess figures that humans have needed to create throughout their history. For example, Cedrus N. Monte writes: 'The presence of the black Madonna fulfils a collective need within the psyche. Her presence informs us that we can, and must fully embrace the darkness of the unpredictable and the unknown'.<sup>76</sup> Although found in Christian shrines and churches, for Matthew Fox, the meaning of the black Madonna somehow transcends any one faith or belief system. She therefore represents something more profound and all-encompassing:

Because she is dark and leads us into the dark, the Black Madonna is also cosmic. She is the great cosmic Mother on whose lap all creation exists. The universe itself is embraced and mothered by her. She yanks us out of our *anthropocentrism* and back into a state of honouring *all our relations*. She ushers in an era of

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<sup>75</sup> Gustafson (Ed), *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine*. p.xv.

<sup>76</sup> Cedrus N. Monte, "At the Threshold of Psycho-Genesis/the Mournful Face of God," *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine*, ed. Fred Gustafson (Berwick: Nicholas Hays Inc., 2003).p.18.

cosmology, of our relationship to the whole instead of just parts, be they nation parts, ethnic parts, religious parts, or private parts.<sup>77</sup>

Fox further argues that humans have been 'missing out' on this dark feminine aspect and we need to 'restore' it in order for us to become 'whole'. By ignoring the darkness, we have made ourselves susceptible to negative traits such as racism and sexism. It has also led us to the environmental problems we now face. An acknowledgement of the darkness will help us overcome these problems. In this respect, the black Madonna also represents the recognition of the more sorrowful aspects of our lives:

The Black Madonna sees things in terms of the whole and therefore does not countenance the abuse, oppression, or exploitation of the many for the sake of financial aggrandizement of the few. She has always stood for justice for the oppressed and lower classes.<sup>78</sup>

This notion of the black Madonna as a symbol of political liberation is one that recurs in the literature and I will return to it in more detail below. Throughout the essays there is a strong sense of the personal. Writers emphasise how the 'encounter' with a particular black Madonna was an important, often life changing experience. Some talk of going on a spiritual as well as physical journey. Some find the black Madonna becomes an aspect of their dreams. She helps them to solve their problems or overcome their difficulties and to reach a more spiritual understanding of themselves and the world around them. The

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<sup>77</sup> Matthew Fox, "The Return of the Black Madonna: A Sign of the Times or How the Black Madonna Is Shaking Us up for the 21st Century," The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine, ed. Fred Gustafson (Berwick: Nicholas Hays Inc, 2003). pp.83-84.

<sup>78</sup> Fox, "The Return of the Black Madonna: A Sign of the Times or How the Black Madonna Is Shaking Us up for the 21st Century." p.85.

Reverend Toni Boehm describes the profound effect she believes the black Madonna has had on her and life, especially her creativity:

I was introduced to the idea of the Black Madonna in the early 1990s. The moment Her name was mentioned to me, my heart leapt. I went on a search to find out more about Her and what it was that She had to offer me. At first it was a purely intellectual pursuit. I read everything I could find about Her. I reflected on these findings and placed pictures of her on my altar...In a flash she became a “living reality” for me. Her spark became a flame, and my life began to change dramatically. From this heart-filled experience, She began to make Herself known to me. She began to pour Herself through me in the form of poems, articles, plays, songs, and more. Consciously, I had never considered myself a creative individual... Now however, She was to turn my world inside-out and upside-down.<sup>79</sup>

What this collection, and indeed some of the other writers I examine, make clear is that the black Madonna is a living presence that has relevance, not only in their own lives, but for humanity in a wider sense. The black Madonna is therefore not merely an historical phenomenon but an important, if not necessary part of us.

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford’s work *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* traces the development of the concept of ‘the Goddess’ throughout human history, from the Palaeolithic era to the Virgin Mary. They place the black Madonna in the tradition of goddesses portrayed as black and in this respect, the black Madonna ‘relates to the realm

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<sup>79</sup> Toni Boehm, "At First: A Journey with the Black Madonna into Her Initiatory Playground - the Unconscious Mind," The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine, ed. Fred Gustafson (Berwick: Nicholas Hays Inc, 2003). pp.210-211.

of the dark moon, the creative depths from which new light is born'<sup>80</sup>. The black Madonna is seen as offering us something beyond the 'usual submissive mother' image of the Virgin Mary: 'It is as though all the denied feelings of orthodoxy found in their opaque darkness a place to wonder anew at the magical healing powers of nature herself.'<sup>81</sup>

Baring and Cashford see connections between the black Madonna and the concept of Sophia, the personification of Wisdom in the Gnostic tradition, her Jewish counterpart, the Shekinah and the Bride in the Song of Songs. They describe how the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary during the Middle Ages coincided with that of courtly love, the popularity of the Grail legends and was paralleled by the rise of the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah. This combination of cults, mysticism and myth led to a re-emergence of a feminine aspect to the spiritual and from out of this 'dramatic eruption of the feminine archetype' also emerged a rise in the popularity of black Madonna Shrines<sup>82</sup>.

## **ii) Black Madonnas as symbols of liberation**

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's book *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy*<sup>83</sup> also draws on the anthropological themes of Moss and Cappannari. She expands the scope of her study to include the symbolic aspects, both psychological and political, of black Madonnas. Although her work includes references to black Madonnas in general, the main focus is on the black Madonnas of Italy. Birnbaum sees black Madonnas as a point of conflict between the hierarchy of the Church and its subjects. They are seen as part of a strong culture of popular beliefs and superstitions that include

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<sup>80</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*.p.586.

<sup>81</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*.p.588.

<sup>82</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*.p.643.

<sup>83</sup> Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy*.

witches and the evil eye. Chiavola Birnbaum sees these beliefs as a link between the pre-Christian past and the Christian present. For Chiavola Birnbaum, the black Madonna represents a link to an ancient past when the feminine, particularly represented by the earth, was venerated. However, black Madonnas represent more than this link to the past. They are also a potential symbol of liberation:

Remembering an ancient belief, what if the earth, personified by the ancient woman divinity, black madonnas, and other women is pregnant with possibilities? What if the memory of an age of peace and equality among all living creatures, a memory embodied in black madonnas and other dark women divinities of submerged cultures, becomes a future celebrating equality with the beauty of differences, and justice?<sup>84</sup>

Chiavola Birnbaum's subsequent book *Dark mother: African Origins and Godmothers*<sup>85</sup> goes further in tracing the origins of the black Madonna, expanding on the themes of black Madonnas, subaltern studies and liberation. She uses a wide range of sources, from genetic to anthropological in order to prove her theories about the African origin of the black Madonna. For Chiavola Birnbaum, 'Images of black madonnas may be our most palpable evidence of the persisting memory of the primordial dark mother of Africa on the continent of Europe.'<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy. p.15.

<sup>85</sup> Birnbaum, Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers.

<sup>86</sup> Birnbaum, Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers. p.115.



### iii) Black Madonnas and the 'hidden tradition'

In these writings, the character of Mary Magdalene has assumed an important role and she has been linked with the black Madonna by several writers, most notably Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, Ean Begg, and Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince. Their theories rest on the premise that the black Madonna actually represents Mary Magdalene and not the Virgin Mary. This suggestion moves the discourse about black Madonnas from the anthropological theories of Moss and Cappanari into another, even more controversial, sphere altogether. The original assertion made by Baigent and Leigh has meant that in this literature it becomes difficult to separate the two figures. Mary Magdalene has already been the subject of much scholarly (and not so scholarly) debate, so it is not my intention to go over what has already been written. However, because she figures so often in the writings I analyse in my research, she cannot be ignored. For the purposes of my research therefore I do discuss Mary Magdalene in relation to the figure of the black Madonna.

Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh wrote several articles for a magazine called *The Unexplained* on black Madonnas and their pre-Christian connections<sup>87</sup>. The articles looked at the pre-Christian connections between many famous shrines, including Chartres Cathedral in France and Montserrat in Spain. On this latter shrine they wrote:

[Montserrat] 'is a shrine for newly married couples, and the statue is deemed to preside over marriage, sexuality and fertility. According to traditional legends, prayers to this statue are believed to ward off sterility.'<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Baigent and Leigh, "Virgins with a Pagan Past.", Baigent and Leigh, "The Goddess Behind the Mask.", Baigent and Leigh, "Guardians of the Living Earth."

<sup>88</sup> Baigent and Leigh, "Virgins with a Pagan Past." pp.61-65.

The black Madonna in the crypt of Chartres Cathedral is titled Notre Dame de Sous-Terre and Baigent and Leigh interpret this as 'Queen of the Underworld'. This interpretation is not unproblematic. Others have interpreted this as 'Our Lady Underground.'<sup>89</sup> Whilst 'underground' is a description of where the statue is situated, to use the title 'Queen of the Underworld' gives a much more exotic, pre-Christian name to a Christian image. There had been a shrine on the site since Druidic times. On the pedestal beneath the statue is the Roman inscription 'Virgini Paritures', 'the Virgin who will give birth.'<sup>90</sup> For Baigent and Leigh, the Pre-Christian goddess:

was an extremely complex figure. She was simultaneously good and evil, creative and destructive, beneficent and malevolent, light and dark. She embodied the myriad aspects of nature – storm, drought and famine as well as bountiful harvests and the fruits of the earth. At times, she could be cruelly chaste, at times shamelessly promiscuous – a combination of harlot and nun.<sup>91</sup>

Baigent and Leigh suggest that the black Madonna actually portrayed Mary Magdalene, who represented everything that the Virgin Mary did not. She provided the aspects of the feminine that had been missing from the Virgin Mary. It is in this context that I return to the work of Ean Begg. His work moves on from a study of the symbolic, to include the same themes and ideas of Baigent and Leigh. Begg argues that many sites associated with black Madonnas are also associated with Mary Magdalene and he too believes that

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<sup>89</sup> Jean Markale uses this interpretation in his work rather than the more exotic sounding 'Queen of the Underworld'.

<sup>90</sup> Baigent and Leigh, "Virgins with a Pagan Past." p.61.

<sup>91</sup> Baigent and Leigh, "The Goddess Behind the Mask." 114-117.

black Madonnas are portrayals of her rather than the Virgin Mary. Such ideas are part of what these authors describe as a 'hidden tradition' in Europe.<sup>92</sup>

According to authors such as Baigent and Leigh and Begg, the Magdalene was the sexual partner, if not wife, of Jesus and the descendants of their offspring became the Merovingian kings who ruled France for several centuries until they were deposed in the year 679 CE. This theory further asserts that this bloodline never died out but continued in secret and that part of the mission of the Prieuré was to protect this bloodline and perhaps one day restore it to the throne of France. Begg suggests that in Mary Magdalene, the Prieuré may have found an 'alternative' Mary and this alternative finds expression in the figure of the black Madonna.<sup>93</sup>

Begg identifies around 50 centres of the cult of Mary Magdalene that also contain shrines to black Madonnas. The prevalence of these sites in Southern France and the intense devotion to both cults in this area is thought to be the result of the legend that has the Magdalene fleeing the Holy Land after the Crucifixion and spending the rest of her life in Southern France. One of her companions on this journey was said to be Sara, an Egyptian serving girl. This character is now venerated as St Sara-le-Kali (Sara the Black). She became the patron of gypsies, who elect their gypsy queen in the crypt where her statue resides at Les Saintes Maries de la Mer (see fig.11). This was the place where the Magdalene and her party were believed to have disembarked. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a local aristocrat, Marquis de Baroncelli-Javon, was instrumental in developing the pilgrimage as way of promoting Provençal culture and encouraging tourism. The

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<sup>92</sup> For a more detailed exploration of these theories see Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln, The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail; Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, The Templar Legacy (London: Corgi Press, 1998). and Lynn Picknett, Mary Magdalene: Christianity's Hidden Goddess (London: Constable and Robinson, 2003).

<sup>93</sup> Begg gives an account of the alleged origins of the pilgrimage in Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin. pp.145-146. Other researchers have shown how the pilgrimage was largely the invention of the Marquis and his friends. See for example Ellen Badone, "Pilgrimage, Tourism and the *Da Vinci Code* at Les-Saintes-Maries-De-La-Mer, France," Culture and Religion 9.1 (2008).

procession where Sara is taken in procession and dipped into the sea every year in memory of this voyage was finally endorsed by the church in 1935.<sup>94</sup>

These ideas are also explored in the work of Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince. Picknett and Prince elaborate much further on the connections between Mary Magdalene and the black Madonna, also suggesting connections between these two with the Egyptian goddess Isis. Whereas Begg was uncertain as to why there should be connections between Mary Magdalene and black Madonnas, Picknett and Prince are much bolder in their conclusions. They suggest that Christianity's true origins lie in the religion of ancient Egypt, particularly the worship of Isis. Mary Magdalene was, they argue, a priestess of this religion and this explains the connections between Mary Magdalene, Isis and black Madonnas.

The focus of my research is on how the black Madonna functions within a particular church, it is not to try and uncover the historical origins of these images. Therefore it is outside of the scope my research to address all the above claims and assess how accurate or otherwise they might be. However, it is still possible to comment on problems with the above approaches. The main problem, in terms of what my own research is trying to do, is that such approaches make too many generalisations about black Madonnas. Such claims are made largely about black Madonnas in France, particularly southern France.

This virtually ignores all the black Madonnas outside of this narrow geographical area. There is no way of knowing whether worshippers at these shrines see the black Madonnas there as Mary Magdalene. Nowhere do these authors ask anyone worshipping at shrines what these images represent to them. Even if there were some black Madonnas

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<sup>94</sup> Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin.pp.220-221.

that represented Mary Magdalene rather than the Virgin Mary, this does not mean all black Madonnas mean the same. The problems with such an approach can be highlighted by the following example.

The inclusion of the figure of St Sara in black Madonna literature has led to writers such as Begg, Picknett and Prince and Chiavola Birnbaum to consider the place of Romani people in the understanding of black Madonnas. However, the portrayal of Romani people in black Madonna literature is concerning. The literature constantly refers to Roma people as 'gypsies' with no acknowledgement of how problematic this title might be. The title 'gypsy' is a contested one even amongst the Roma and Traveller communities themselves.<sup>95</sup> Assumptions are made about Roma cultural and religious practices but this information would not appear to be coming from either Roma people themselves or those who have conducted research into Roma beliefs and practices.

Adrian Marsh has argued: 'What is presented as research about Gypsy peoples, what has been "poached" from them in fact is more likely to be the record of contact between non-Gypsy people and their imaginative reconstruction'.<sup>96</sup> Marsh also argues that what writers such as those above are doing is contributing to a populist construction of Romanies and their history, a history that remains 'a contextual and highly contested arena': 'In the purveying of popular ideas the Romani past, the imaginary *Gypsy*, and his/her connection to "the wild" or exotic, maintains its hold on both the European conception of Gypsy people and how they came to be'.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> See for example Dimitrina Petrova, *The Roma: Between a Myth and a Future*, 2004, European Roma Rights Centre, Available: <http://www.errc.org/clikk.php?cikk=1844>, Accessed 28/09/2010. and Larry Olomoofe, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Contemporary Perceptions of Roma in Europe," *Roma Rights Quarterly* 3 (2007).

<sup>96</sup> Adrian Marsh, "Research and the Many Representations of Romani Identity," *Roma Rights Quarterly* 3 (2007). p.23

<sup>97</sup> Marsh, "Research and the Many Representations of Romani Identity." pp.28-29

Roma are described as matriarchal goddess worshippers by both Picknett and Prince and Chiavola Birnbaum<sup>98</sup> amongst others. According to Romani scholar Ian Hancock, some groups of Romani people today still hold onto beliefs that are connected to their pre-Christian origins. However, Hancock also points out that large numbers of Roma have converted to Pentecostalism in reaction to negative experiences as Roman Catholics. Negative attitudes towards Roma people are prevalent during the festivities at Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, something which is not touched upon in the black Madonna literature, further enforcing the point made by Marsh that much of this information is coming from the imaginations of writers and not from Roma people themselves.<sup>99</sup>

Badone and Wiley both describe the pilgrimage and the people surrounding it, whether pilgrim or tourist, Roma or not as actors in a social performance with multiple understandings of the shrine's significance. Badone argues that Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is: 'a busy intersection indeed or, to risk mixing metaphors in my conclusion, a screen on which multiple, overlapping groups of stakeholders project their own pictures of spiritual and social reality.'<sup>100</sup> A description that is useful, not only in terms of this particular shrine, but in a wider context of the black Madonna phenomenon. I would suggest that it is not simply St Sara and her pilgrimage that is a screen on which different groups project. The black Madonna herself is also such a screen. The mystery surrounding the black Madonna allows for scholars, black or white, to project their own interpretations onto her.

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<sup>98</sup> Picknett and Prince, The Templar Legacy. p.169. Birnbaum, Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers. pp.132-134

<sup>99</sup> The problems associated with the pilgrimage and the popularity of extreme right wing politics in the surrounding area amongst the local population are covered in Eric Wiley, "Romani Performance and Heritage Tourism: The Pilgrimage of the Gypsies at Les Saintes-Maries-De-La-Mer," The Drama Review 49.2 (2005).

<sup>100</sup> Badone, "Pilgrimage, Tourism and the *Da Vinci Code* at Les-Saintes-Maries-De-La-Mer, France." p.42

## Sarah Boss's green mariology and the black Madonna

The work of theologian Sarah Jane Boss makes an important contribution to the field of black Madonna research. Boss examines the symbolism from a Christian, rather than pre-Christian standpoint, something that is largely absent from the literature. As I commented above, there is indeed a tendency to see black Madonnas largely in terms of their pre-Christian roots, rather than as a Christian symbol. In her book *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Boss examines the connections between the development of the Cult of the Virgin Mary and Western culture's changing attitude to the natural world.<sup>101</sup> Although she only mentions black Madonnas briefly in this work, she suggests that black Madonnas can be classed as representations of Mary as the 'Virgin in Majesty'. These representations of Mary emphasise her status and her authority with Mary enthroned and often crowned, at the same time emphasising her motherhood with the Christ child on her lap. Boss demonstrates the ability of the Virgin in Majesty to unnerve observers 'for whom Mary is only ever meek and unassuming.'<sup>102</sup> She quotes the Anglican theologian B.F. Westcott, who was impressed by the statues at the pilgrimage site of La Salette:

There is nothing like the black image of Le Puy, or Dijon, or Notre Dame de Bon Secours at Rouen, which creates an involuntary sense of repulsion or even disgust as if we were in the presence of some fetish-worship. The figures of the Virgin which are the object or symbols of devotion are perfect in taste and beauty. They

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<sup>101</sup> Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000).

<sup>102</sup> Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary*.p.9.

claim to represent simply an historical fact. The very purity in which the popular faith is presented makes its novelty more conspicuously evident.<sup>103</sup>

Boss notes that it is the suggestion of paganism and the authority of the image that combine in the black Madonna to make observers uncomfortable. Earlier in this chapter I drew attention to Scheer's suggestions that attitudes towards blackness and race have contributed to this 'dissonance' in seeing the Virgin Mary as anything other than white. The comment from Westcott and the comments highlighted by Moss and Cappannari, would appear to support Scheer's suggestions. It could be argued that there is more than just 'paganism' to cause the repulsion or disgust.

In her later book, *Mary*<sup>104</sup>, Boss examines the phenomenon of the black Madonna in more detail. Continuing to examine the connection between Mary and her 'part in the theology of nature' Boss describes this area of study as a 'green Mariology.'<sup>105</sup> In terms of explanations for their blackness, Boss finds the suggestions of more recent French researchers Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet and Sylvie Vilatte worthy of examination. Cassagnes-Brouquet follows on from the earlier work of Emile Saillens. She argues that black Madonnas are mostly found in the South East and central areas of France, which were the regions most heavily influenced by classical culture. Summarising Cassagnes-Brouquet's theories, Boss writes:

The trade route from the Mediterranean up the Rhône Valley in ancient times ensured that cultural influences from Africa and the East could always find their way into Gaul, and the influx of wider Mediterranean culture became particularly strong during the period of the Greek colony at Marseilles (founded about

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<sup>103</sup> Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary*.p.8.

<sup>104</sup> Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary*, New Century Theology (London and New York: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>105</sup> Boss, *Mary*. pp.ix-x.



600BC), followed by the Roman occupation which eventually spread to the whole country.<sup>106</sup>

According to Boss, Cassagnes-Brouquet promotes the notion that many black Madonnas are on sites once dedicated to goddesses and the blackness 'represents a tradition of continuity with the pre-Christian past of the same sites.'<sup>107</sup> Vilatte has her own suggestions regarding the black Madonna. According to Boss, Vilatte:

holds that statues which were previously white were deliberately painted black in the fourteenth century as part of a campaign to revive interest in the Crusades. According to this theory, the representation of Christian saints as black was intended to draw attention of ordinary Europeans to the possibility of converting dark-skinned Moors to Christianity.<sup>108</sup>

Although Boss acknowledges that the above theories have some merit, she feels there are still significant gaps in their explanations:

If the statues were painted black in the fourteenth century, then why did people not return them to their original colour at a later time? What was, and is, the attraction of continuing the statues' blackness? Then again, if the Virgins were coloured black in continuity with pagan precedent, the question is similar: why was black considered an appropriate colour for the goddesses, and why did Christians see their blackness as an attribute that they wished, and still wish, to maintain in their images of the Virgin Mary?<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Boss, Mary.p.78.

<sup>107</sup> Boss, Mary.p.78.

<sup>108</sup> Boss, Mary.p.78.

<sup>109</sup> Boss, Mary.p.78.

Boss suggests therefore that the colour of the black Madonna must continue to have some significance, and as this significance is spiritual, we must seek this meaning in the spiritual rather than the historical realm. Boss gives several reasons of her own as to why this blackness continues to have a spiritual significance and meaning. Given the usually negative cultural associations of blackness, it may seem strange that figures of ‘supreme sanctity’ such as the Virgin and Child would be represented as such. However, Boss argues, in terms of Christian theology, the blackness of the Virgin and Child is especially appropriate. She suggests this blackness may be seen to represent the most (mistakenly) despised and rejected in human culture:

so that in the black Madonna we see God raising up these things and these people up to a place of honour. In becoming human, Christ binds himself to every last part of the human condition and the material world – including the things that we think of as ‘black’ – and offers it the possibility of redemption and glorification. In the blackness of the regal Virgin and Child, the very humblest are exalted.<sup>110</sup>

The second possibility Boss offers is that the black Madonna might act as the catalyst to prompt us in becoming aware of and confronting the ‘darkness’ or ‘dark events’ (i.e. sin) within us. Boss gives the example of Our Lady of Rocamadour, a black Madonna, whom pilgrims visited as an act of penitence. Traditionally pilgrims would climb the hundreds of steps to the shrine on their knees:

Yet if the Virgin calls us to acknowledge the darkness of sin, this is only in order that, by doing so, we become freed from that sin and are brought out of darkness

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<sup>110</sup> Boss, Mary, p.80.

and into the light of Christ; that is to say, the black virgin signifies and provokes the process of spiritual enlightenment.<sup>111</sup>

Boss describes how the connection between the black Madonna and the concept of chaos has been examined by a number of authors. In these writings, the colour of the black Madonna is seen as evoking the ‘primal darkness, the chaotic matter, or the earth that is “without form and void” of which the universe is made.’<sup>112</sup> Relating this to the black Madonna, many are associated with places such as forests or mountains, places where nature might be perceived as untamed or chaotic. Black Madonnas are also associated with the earth as both a source of fertility and life and as a place where we return in death. It is in places of chaos and ambiguity therefore, that spiritual enlightenment can be found:

So that which is furthest from God is simultaneously that which is closest to God; at the heart of the humblest of creatures is nothing other than divine Goodness; and darkness is a cipher for light. Seen in this way, the blackness of the Black Madonna may refer precisely to these paradoxes.<sup>113</sup>

Although Boss discusses the pre-Christian influences and connections of black Madonnas, what is most significant about her work is the attempt to offer an interpretation of their blackness and its importance in a Christian theological context. This is an aspect that is often absent in the literature. So much of it is concentrated on the pre-Christian origins, seeing them as part of an occult tradition, rather than as primarily a Christian symbol. I am not convinced that it is only in the ‘realm of the spiritual’ that explanations regarding the black Madonna can be found. Instead, it is entirely possible

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<sup>111</sup> Boss, *Mary*. p.81.

<sup>112</sup> Boss, *Mary*.p.85.

<sup>113</sup> Boss, *Mary*.pp.97-98.

that interpretations and explanations of the black Madonna have an historical basis. Although certain themes may recur in what is written about black Madonnas, their symbolic meaning may well be subject to change depending on who is interpreting such a symbol and in what cultural and historical context. However, Boss is right to question why the black Madonna should therefore have a continuing significance for Christian worshippers. This emphasis on the pre-Christian rather than the Christian is an issue to which I will return later on in my research and as I hope to demonstrate, these ideas dominate the more populist section of the literature on black Madonnas.

## **Summary**

This chapter has explored a range of literature on the phenomenon of the black Madonna. I now move on from reviewing previous literature on black Madonnas to beginning the discussion that formed the basis of my own research and the main themes that emerged. In the course of this exploration, several themes and issues came to the fore and merit further exploration. Although I have separated these themes into three categories, they are not exclusive and do indeed overlap in some circumstances.

The first main theme is that of the pre-Christian origins of the black Madonna and the influence on their creation of other traditions, such as Judaism. The majority of the above literature makes it very clear that the origins of the black Madonna lie in an earlier pre-Christian era. Sometimes this connection is explicit, with black Madonna shrines occupying specific spaces once dedicated to pre-Christian goddesses. At other times this connection is less obvious, whereby the black Madonna has taken over some of the functions and attributes of these goddesses. The most popular influence over the black

Madonna as identified in the literature is the Ancient Egyptian goddess Isis. The connection between the black Madonna and the character of the Bride in the Old Testament Song of Songs has also been made.

Secondly, the symbolic meaning attributed to the blackness of these images, is an important aspect of the literature. The analysis of this symbolism has been largely (although not exclusively) influenced by Jungian psychoanalytic theories. As a consequence of this influence, the colour of the black Madonna is believed, like her pre-Christian forerunners, to represent the blackness of the fertile earth. The association of the black Madonna with natural phenomena such as caves, forests and springs reinforces this connection with nature. Her blackness is also thought to represent sorrow, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This is reflected in the black Madonna's ability to grant fertility and to resuscitate dead infants. On a more abstract level, this blackness is said to represent the chaos or void in which everything exists in potential. The black Madonna represents the darkness from which comes the light.

Lastly, the black Madonna is portrayed as an alternative to the more familiar, white representations of the Virgin Mary. Whereas whiteness represents church orthodoxy and hierarchy, the black Madonna represents a much more radical vision of Catholicism, closer to its pre-Christian origins and of a much more heterodox nature. The black Madonna is seen a symbol of liberation, especially for women and other oppressed groups. Some researchers have chosen to see the black Madonna as part of a 'hidden tradition' within Christianity. In this tradition, the black Madonna is directly linked to the figure of Mary Magdalene. According to some writers, the black Madonna is in fact

Mary Magdalene and not the Virgin Mary at all. This has further implications as to what the black Madonna represents on a symbolic as well as a literal level.

All of these themes raise questions that I want to explore further in my own research.

Black Madonnas have an aura of mystery and unknowability concerning their origins and purposes so they become invested with meanings, projections and desires by those who write about them, in such a way that scholarly methods and disciplines are sometimes displaced by highly speculative and imaginative theoretical projections. The image of the black Madonna is explicitly linked to particular ideas surrounding darkness, fertility and female sexuality. This image is set up in direct contrast to the more familiar image of the Madonna as a white woman. However, these ideas are very rarely examined in a critical manner. Issues around race, sexuality and gender, which might be raised by such claims, are largely ignored. This raises questions of 'otherness' in terms both of the symbolic significance of dark femininity and its associations with the unconscious and in terms of postcolonial theories of race, gender and representation of the 'other'. I hope to address the notion of the black Madonna as 'other' by examining such meanings in light of these theories of race and gender. My research provides a critical perspective on this subject that is sometimes absent from the current literature.

Apart from the work of Sarah Jane Boss, very little of the literature looks at the black Madonna as a Christian symbol. Rather, the association of black Madonnas with their pre-Christian origins is so strongly emphasised that it becomes difficult to see them as a Christian symbol at all. Whilst the blackness of these images may well have significance for the congregations who worship at their shrines, little of the literature available concentrates on the attitudes of these congregations. There is discussion of the various

ritual practices conducted at such shrines but it is difficult to speculate as to whether black Madonnas have their own specific rituals and cults that in some way relate to their blackness. It would be interesting to know exactly what this significance might entail.

In this thesis I explore the possibility of examining the black Madonna as a Christian rather than a pre-Christian symbol. I consider the symbolic and religious functions of shrines with black Madonnas and evaluate their significance as the focus for devotional practices associated with popular Christianity.

## Chapter Two: Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I present the methods and theoretical framework used in the research. The chapter is divided into four sections. Section one provides a general discussion of the multi method approach used throughout the research and the justifications for this. Section two sets out the theoretical basis for the ethnographic research. Section three sets out the ethnographic methods used and section four considers the issues that are raised in the course of ethnographic research. This includes acknowledging the problems that arose in the research process; considering alternative ways of conducting the research; concerns relating to power relations in research and issues of subjectivity and reflexivity.

### Section One: Using a Multi Method Approach: Researcher as Bricoleur

Denzin and Lincoln describe the process of research as one that both studies and collects a range of empirical materials.<sup>114</sup> They liken the use of multiple methods, or *bricolage*, to 'montage, quilt making, and jazz improvisation' whereby 'many different things are going on at the same time – different voices, different perspectives, points of view, angles of vision'.<sup>115</sup> The use of multiple methods is also a strategy for validating research. Such an approach:

reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representations. The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best

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<sup>114</sup> Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials, ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, Second Edition ed. (Thousand Oaks, London, New Dehli: Sage Publications, 2003). p.5

<sup>115</sup> Denzin and Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research." p.7



understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry.<sup>116</sup>

Shulamit Reinharz suggests that using more than one methodological approach within a single research project reflects the researcher's desire for 'thoroughness' and 'credibility'.<sup>117</sup> For my research, these issues are particularly pertinent, given the speculative nature of some sections of previous research in this field.<sup>118</sup> The absence of the 'voice' of worshippers in this literature is another issue I hope to address by using multiple methods. Relying on just a text-based analysis of existing literature would be insufficient to redress this imbalance. By combining the text-based research with an ethnographic approach, it is hoped these imbalances can be challenged.

For Reinharz, the use of multiple methods invokes the image of the quest or journey. The research is a 'process of discovery' and as this process, or journey continues, the researcher may find they need to use different methods or tools.<sup>119</sup> As Reinharz suggests, this process and development becomes part of one's research project:

As projects proceed, new experiences are interwoven and new voices heard. The work process of the research becomes an integral component of the issues studied. The process becomes the part of the product. This approach is humble since "findings" are housed in the project's specific features, rather than claimed as disembodied truth.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Denzin and Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research." p.8.

<sup>117</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). p.197.

<sup>118</sup> For example see Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, The Templar Legacy (1998).

<sup>119</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research. p.211.

<sup>120</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research. p.212.

This image of the research project as a journey is an evocative one and such ‘journeys’ may take the scholar to unexpected places. When embarking on his research into the annual festa of the Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street in New York, Robert Orsi’s initial aim was to conduct historical research on the experience of American-Catholics in the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, as he acknowledges, what was found ‘in East Harlem made it impossible for me to establish this pastness of that particular past in any simple sense’.<sup>121</sup> Past and present were inseparable. Orsi therefore describes his original research on the Madonna of Mount Carmel in Harlem as ‘a kind of layered fieldwork in the fissure between the present and the past’<sup>122</sup>. Orsi found himself using ethnographic research methods that took him ‘outside the borders of historiography’ and this approach provided a challenge to traditional disciplinary boundaries.<sup>123</sup>

I have also found myself crossing interdisciplinary boundaries. Whilst I am not suggesting my own research is as boundary-challenging as Orsi’s, it nevertheless crosses some of the borders that Orsi identified. When embarking on the fieldwork, I thought I would be able to keep my distance, to sit at the back of the church, just observing. Eventually I joined in not only with church services but with social aspects of the church as well. This was not something I had considered happening. In the case of the shrine at St Mary’s Church where I have been researching, by using material from the archives in combination with observing and interviewing people currently attending the church, I hope to show how the past and present are closely intertwined.

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<sup>121</sup> Robert A. Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). p.xi.

<sup>122</sup> Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959. p.xi.

<sup>123</sup> Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959. p.xii-xiii.

## Section Two: Theoretical Frameworks

### Narrative, Myth and Multivocality

At the beginning of the research, both when dealing with texts on black Madonnas and during my early fieldwork experiences, it became clear that one of the most significant things linking both aspects of the research was the idea of narrative. When trying to examine the many narratives that surround black Madonnas, Wendy Doniger's book *The Implied Spider* has been most useful. Although her own research focus is on myth, exploring the ways in which myths are produced and how we might study them, I have found her approach helpful in dealing with other forms of narrative as well.

Doniger defines myth as 'A much re-told narrative that is transparent to a variety of constructions of meaning, a neutral structure that allows paradoxical meanings to be held in charged tension'.<sup>124</sup> Whilst not all narratives connected to a black Madonna may be defined as 'myth', Doniger's definition is relevant because it acknowledges the multiplicities of meaning. As I hope to show in the course of my research, such multiplicities, including those conflicts, are also to be found in narratives surrounding black Madonnas. For Doniger, myth is not necessarily false; it is not something that is contrasted with truth, reality, fact or history. The idea of myth is as something ambiguous. People may continue to believe a myth even when it is shown to be a lie: 'In its positive and enduring sense, what a myth *is*, is a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it'.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, the 'truth' (or otherwise) of some black Madonna narratives are impossible to discern. Such narratives occupy an ambiguous position between 'truth' and fiction.

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<sup>124</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).p.80.

<sup>125</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. p.2.

For Doniger, myths are *multivocal*, that is they have ‘many voices and serve many interests’.<sup>126</sup> She argues that ‘within myths there are so many points of view; and outside the myth there are so many different ways of telling the story’.<sup>127</sup> I would argue that Doniger’s notion of multivocality can be applied more widely, to other forms of narrative. Given that black Madonna narratives come from different sources, and represent different points of view, this can similarly be described as multivocality. Doniger herself argues for a ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’ approach in research, with the emphasis on ‘real people’ who are ‘authors of texts with many different agendas’.<sup>128</sup> Drawing on this approach, I suggest that multivocality does not only apply to fictional or textual narratives. My research involves the stories of ‘real people’: worshippers at St Mary’s Church, the artist that created the statue, and representatives from the local history society. I argue that their stories also contribute to the multivocality of that particular shrine.

Doniger also argues that multivocality equally applies to the interpretation of narratives, not only to their telling, proposing that ‘the culture of the interpreter is no more monolithic than the culture of the teller’.<sup>129</sup> In order to study the ‘many refractions of the narrative’ we need to apply ‘multiple techniques’.<sup>130</sup> Doniger suggests therefore that researchers can create for themselves a ‘toolbox of methodologies’,<sup>131</sup> taking on the role of “the handyman”, or “rag and bones man” who finds, fixes and recycles, using different tools to do so. However, she also offers potential multidisciplinary scholars two notes of caution. Firstly, as the interpreter of others narratives, we must be aware that ‘it is possible to both misinterpret and to misuse myths. We misinterpret them whenever we

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<sup>126</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. p.112.

<sup>127</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. p.153.

<sup>128</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*.p.73.

<sup>129</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. p.153.

<sup>130</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. p.153.

<sup>131</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. p.153.

ignore context and difference'.<sup>132</sup> Secondly, in adopting a multi-method approach, we should not lose our intellectual discrimination. This is not about having to compromise, but 'maintaining each of several conflicting views in a balanced tension'.<sup>133</sup> In this approach, Doniger demonstrates the complex nature of narrative. Drawing on her work, I argue that the narratives around the figure of the black Madonna represent just such complexities.

### **Lived Religion**

As I set out in the introduction to this thesis, the field of 'lived' or 'everyday' religion provides the theoretical basis for my research. David Hall points out that lived religion differs from 'popular religion' or 'folk religion' in 'breaking the distinction between high and low' and also in that it does not 'displace the institutional or normative perspectives on practice'.<sup>134</sup> This approach demonstrates the richness and complexity of everyday religious experience. It shows how religion affects and in turn, is affected by social structures and processes. At the same time, this approach provides a 'micro' view of religion at the level of the individual and reveals the intricate interplay between these two levels. Therefore, students of lived religion need to 'acknowledge as fully as possible the play of meaning'<sup>135</sup> and to avoid trying to 'abridge or even censure the messiness that leaks into everyday life' in the course of 'representing our subjects as they live and work through multiple realms of meaning'.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, p.154.

<sup>133</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, See in particular Chapter 6: Textual Pluralism and Academic Pluralism.

<sup>134</sup> Hall, "Introduction." p.ix.

<sup>135</sup> Hall, "Introduction." P.x.

<sup>136</sup> Hall, "Introduction." P.xi.

This is the study of religion ‘approached in its place within a more broadly conceived and described lifeworld, the domain of everyday existence, practical activity, and shared understandings.’<sup>137</sup> Approaching the study of religion in this way means that ‘lived religion situates all religious creativity within culture and approaches all religion as lived experience, theology no less than lighting a candle for a troubled loved one.’<sup>138</sup> For Orsi, the study of lived religion ‘directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas’<sup>139</sup> and the concept of lived religion takes account of the relationship between religious practice and the history and culture in which that practice takes place.<sup>140</sup> This approach shows how individual agency is related to wider social structures. Belief influences and is influenced by wider social and personal relationships. In this approach, people’s relationships to the sacred are complex, dynamic ones.

The stories people tell, and trying to understand and interpret those stories, are an important aspect of my research. As Orsi points out, for the scholar of religion:

the interpretive challenge of the study of lived religion is to develop the practice of disciplined attention to people’s signs and practices as they describe, understand and use them, in the circumstances of their experiences, and to the structures and conditions within which these signs and practices emerge. People do not simply act, of course; they attempt to understand and narrate themselves as actors. So the study of lived religion includes the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own

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<sup>137</sup> Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959, p.xiv.

<sup>138</sup> Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959, p.xix.

<sup>139</sup> Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959, p.xix.

<sup>140</sup> Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959, p.xx.

experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many and varied stories they tell of themselves.<sup>141</sup>

In both interviews and in more informal conversations, people at St Mary's told many stories, of their lives both inside and outside of the church. Not all were specifically about the black Madonna. They were about people's wider relationships with church and faith, family and community. This way of studying religion is also a critical, reflective one, wherein scholars acknowledge their own, subjective position in the field. This type of reflection, as I hope to show in the following chapters is, from time to time, absent in much of the literature on black Madonnas.

Because the emphasis in this research is on how ordinary people create their religious lives, I have not interviewed any church officials. This is not to suggest that official church teachings and traditions are not of interest in this research. On the contrary, I wanted to look at how the congregation understood, adapted, challenged or interpreted these official mechanisms of religion. In the words of Ammerman, for scholars who adopt a lived religion approach: 'This does not mean that "official" ideas are never important, only that they are most interesting to us once they get used by someone other than a professional.'<sup>142</sup> As I will demonstrate in chapter three of this research, much is made of how black Madonnas represent an alternative to hierarchical, patriarchal religious structures of such official church teachings. I wanted to find out if those assumptions were correct in the case of the black Madonna at St Mary's, Willesden.

This approach to religion recognizes that religion is also an embodied practice. As Meredith McGuire argues:

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<sup>141</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959*. p.xx.

<sup>142</sup> Introduction, Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). p.5

If our conception of religion is too narrow, then we fail to comprehend how central people's material bodies are in the very practice and experience of religion. All religions engage individuals through concrete practices that involve bodies as well as minds and spirits.<sup>143</sup>

For the individuals at St Mary's, such 'concrete practices that involve bodies as well as minds of spirits' would include walking the route of pilgrimage and in some cases, singing – either in church or indeed at home. Other practices might include the physical relationship with the statue of the black Madonna, such as touching the statue, kneeling in front of it to pray, carrying an icon during pilgrimage, and lighting candles.

Exchanging the sign of peace by shaking hands, embracing and sometimes kissing the other person are all aspects of the embodied nature of religion. Exchanging the sign of peace is also a traditional aspect of the Christian service, a link with the past. For the worshippers at St Mary's, taking part in pilgrimage is similarly a link with the past. Such activities are physical expressions of this relationship with tradition. As McGuire points out 'Religious ritual is like a chain of such embodied practices, each link having the potential to activate deep emotions and a sense of social connectedness, as well as spiritual meanings.'<sup>144</sup> The emphasis on embodiment in this approach to studying religion also needs to include the embodiment of the researcher. The travelling to and from the field site, the act of taking part in the rituals, the movement around the field site, eating and drinking, and one's emotional and physical reactions to what one is experiencing in the field are all part of this embodied process.

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<sup>143</sup> Meredith McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). p.98

<sup>144</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life.p.100.



### **Section Three: Encountering the Black Madonna - Using An Ethnographic Approach**

The fieldwork for my research was undertaken on a part time basis from 2008-2011. For this section of my research, I used an ethnographic approach. Brewer defines ethnography as being:

not one particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given field or setting and its approach, which involves close association with, and often participation in, this setting.

The methods that are often associated with an ethnographic approach help the researcher to ‘access social meanings, observe behaviour and work closely with informants and perhaps participate in the field with them.’ Such methods include ‘in-depth interviewing, participant observation, personal documents and discourse analyses of natural language.’<sup>145</sup> Using participative approaches, as the description suggests, means involving oneself in the field. During my fieldwork, I went to as many services in the daytime as I could. I worked part time during most of the time during the process of this research so had to fit fieldwork around days when I was not working. For similar practical reasons I was not able to attend evening activities and services. The initial aim was to spend time at the church, to get to know people with a view to doing some interviews. I went on two shrine pilgrimage days. The first of these took place in July 2008 and the second in May 2009. I joined in with some social activities at the church which included attending a meeting of the St Anne’s Guild and I helped out with the Christmas bazaar. For the purposes of this research, I used in-depth interviews and

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<sup>145</sup> John D. Brewer, *Ethnography*, Understanding Social Research, ed. Alan Bryman (Maidenhead, New York: Open University Press, 2008). p.11.

participant observation. Rather than personal documents, I used documents from historical archives.

I would argue that all aspects of research involve participation and this is applicable whether our research involves engaging with texts, theories or people. When conducting fieldwork, part of the process is to write up the results in order to present them to an audience. This process of writing up is not a simple one as Hammersley and Atkinson write:

There are many versions that can be constructed. There are different emphases, different theories, different audiences. Each way of constructing 'the ethnography' will bring out different emphases and complementary – even contrasting – analyses. While our texts do not have an arbitrary relationship to 'the field', it is important to recognise as early as possible that there is no single best way to reconstruct and represent the social world.<sup>146</sup>

We must be aware just what it is we are doing when we conduct fieldwork. We must recognise that one piece of fieldwork can never represent the totality of that field.

Dubisch writes that: 'fieldwork never presents us with a coherent account but rather with information and images that we must select and arrange and present and write about' and that 'it is furthermore a retrospective creation. From a present position of understanding we must recreate the always changing past experience of fieldwork'.<sup>147</sup> We should acknowledge that as researchers, we have chosen the particular material that is presented within the research and that our results are often presented some time after the events

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<sup>146</sup> Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, Ethnography: Principles in Practice, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).p.240.

<sup>147</sup> Jill Dubisch, In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).p.17.

described have taken place. Dubisch comments: 'In the context of contemporary anthropology, one would be hard put to maintain that any ethnographic description is ever really simple – or that any ethnography can be simply description.'<sup>148</sup> For Dubisch, then, 'writing always positions – it positions the writer, the reader and those written about. Yet it is well to keep in mind that everyone occupies a variety of positions.'<sup>149</sup>

## **Participant Observation**

Hammersley and Atkinson broadly define ethnography as involving participation:

overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.<sup>150</sup>

However, as Collins observes, the method of participant observation is not straightforward, and the potential confusion as how one might employ this method is also connected to the debate around the 'insider/outsider' status of the researcher:

Does the anthropologist participate then observe, or participate as well as observe, or observe as well as participate, or observe as a participant, or participate as an observer? In any case, observation would seem to equate with 'outsiderhood', participation with 'insiderhood'.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*. p.3.

<sup>149</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*. p.18.

<sup>150</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. p.3.

<sup>151</sup> Peter Collins, "Connecting Anthropology and Quakerism: Transcending the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy," *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*, ed. Elisabeth and Martin D. Stringer Arweck (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2002). p.80.

Tedlock acknowledges this dichotomy between participation and observation that: 'encouraged ethnographers to demonstrate their observational skills in scholarly monographs and their social participation in their personal memoirs. This dualistic approach split public (monographs) from private (memoirs) and objective (ethnographic) from subjective (autobiographical) realms of experience.'<sup>152</sup> She goes on to argue that ethnographers have more recently 'modified participant observation by undertaking the observation of participation.'<sup>153</sup> This modification includes reflection and critical engagement with 'their own participation within the ethnographic frame.'<sup>154</sup> Tedlock describes this new genre of *autoethnography* as an 'attempt to heal the split between public and private realms by connecting the autobiographical impulse (the gaze inward) with the ethnographic impulse (the gaze outward)'.<sup>155</sup>

My approach to observing and participating in this research is more in keeping with Tedlock's 'observation of participation.' I chose to be overt rather than covert in conducting my observations. This was primarily done for ethical reasons. I wanted to conduct interviews with members of the congregation. I felt this would have been difficult had I been pretending to be one of them. Therefore, I was open with the congregation as to the reasons I was there and was happy to answer questions about my research. People did indeed ask me about what I was doing and why I was interested in their church. These conversations provided lines of enquiry and insights that might otherwise not have materialised. Being open with the congregation meant that I would always remain on the outside. They were aware I was a research student from a university and not someone who had come to join their church to worship in the sense

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<sup>152</sup> Barbara Tedlock, "The Observation of Participation and the Emergence of Public Ethnography " The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research 3rd Edition, ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications, 2005). p.467.

<sup>153</sup> Tedlock, "The Observation of Participation and the Emergence of Public Ethnography ". p.467.

<sup>154</sup> Tedlock, "The Observation of Participation and the Emergence of Public Ethnography ". p.467.

<sup>155</sup> Tedlock, "The Observation of Participation and the Emergence of Public Ethnography ". p.467.

that they would worship. In this way, I became an observer of their participation. As Tedlock points out, this method is also autobiographical in the sense that what is being recorded by the observer is from their perspective, even when they are observing others.

## **Interviewing**

On the interview process, Reinharz observes that the positive aspect of interviewing is that it 'offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher'.<sup>156</sup> The interviews were initially intended to be semi-structured and I did have some pre-prepared questions that I intended to use. Usually I began by asking how long someone had been attending the church or why they particularly chose that one. But on the whole, conscious of the fact that some of the main texts on black Madonnas do not include the voices of worshippers, discussion topics were led by the interviewee. This approach was adopted so as to limit the ideas imposed on the data.

Interviewees included members of the congregation, Catharni Stern (the artist who created the statue), and a local historian. The majority of the interviews took place in people's homes, with one taking place at the church itself after a service and another taking place where the person worked. I had made previous contact with the majority of the people I interviewed, chatting before and after services and during events such as pilgrimage or social events, such the Christmas bazaar. Nevertheless, before each interview I would still introduce myself as being a research student from Roehampton and that I was interested in their stories and experiences at the church. There were also further, completely unstructured interviews which took the form of general conversations. These were not taped but rather written up as part of my field notes.

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<sup>156</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research. p.19.

Whilst the more open-ended approach gave my respondents much more freedom to talk about the subjects they felt were important rather than have me impose subjects on them, I found it quite difficult to keep to an interview schedule without wishing to interrupt and appear rude to the people who had kindly agreed to give up their time. This meant some areas were not probed as deeply. Dubisch reflects on the experience of fieldwork, especially in relation to the unfamiliarity of the situation one may find oneself in when in the field and the frustration of not quite getting the information needed, but realising this was due to one's own shortcomings and not fully understanding what those observed were experiencing: 'My own personality also played a role – I find it difficult to begin conversations with complete strangers and so every day of working with pilgrims was a struggle.'<sup>157</sup>

I was also concerned about bringing up sensitive topics of race and gender. I could see from my examination of the existing literature that these issues were relevant to researching black Madonnas. I would have wanted to go into these areas much more deeply but felt uncomfortable doing so. Therefore issues of race and gender arise but mostly obliquely in this research. I am aware this meant that perhaps I did not quite obtain all the material I was searching for. I therefore have to put any failure down to my inexperience as an ethnographer.

### **Archival Research**

I conducted research on the historical background of the church to put current beliefs and practices in context. As Hammersley and Atkinson have observed:

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<sup>157</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, p.104.

Documents can provide information about the settings being studied, or about their wider contexts, particularly about key figures or organizations. Sometimes this information will be of a kind that is not available from other sources. On other occasions they may provide important corroboration, or may challenge, information received from informants or from observation.<sup>158</sup>

My archival research included use of both national and local archives. The material from these archives included local history guides to St Mary's church and copies of the parish magazine. I hoped to get some more insight into the actual production of the statue and any initial responses to the statue when it first arrived. On using historical archive material alongside material from encounters from living people, Orsi suggests we remember that 'inert documents stored away in archives were once the living media of real people's engagement with the unfolding events of their times. The challenge is to figure out the relation between these archived pieces of a once-living world and the world from which they came.'<sup>159</sup>

On the surface, it may appear that using material from archives is the least difficult type of data to access and utilise in a piece of research. Archival material is not 'real' in the sense that dealing with people is 'real'. But as the comment from Orsi demonstrates, archival material is not simplistic. There is a danger that historical research becomes a colonisation of the past; that 'reference to the deadness of the past is a way of staking a claim on it'.<sup>160</sup> For example, the historical material may contradict or contest the data from the other ethnographic methods used in the research. The way in which a researcher may use particular historical sources is not what the source was originally intended for.

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<sup>158</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. p.122.

<sup>159</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959*. P.xxvii.

<sup>160</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959*. P.xxvii.

On the use of history by academic researchers, Dubisch asks: 'What exactly is history in the context of a holy shrine? And does history mean the same thing for the pilgrims at the shrine as it does for me, the outsider, the Western academic?'<sup>161</sup> My answer to Dubisch is no: I do not assume that history means the same for me as it does for the congregation. I cannot possibly have the same relationship with that history that they do. As I hope to show, history at St Mary's is closely tied to the worship and the specialness of the shrine. As a researcher I am not necessarily approaching this history in the same way. For example, in the course of my research, I have used local history guides. These were intended as a means of passing on information about the church. In my research, they have become a particular set of narratives which demonstrate how history is constructed.

#### **Section Four: Reflexivity, ethics and the research process**

In this section, I consider the reflexive and ethical dimensions in conducting ethnographic research. As Hammersley and Atkinson have pointed out, when conducting research in this way, we as researchers become part of the social world we are researching. Being a part of that social world is problematic and in order to address those problems, we must adopt an approach whereby we can be critical of just what it is we are doing in the research process. We need to recognise that the account we are producing through our observations and writings is just one account of many. We can never provide a complete picture of the social world we researching.

On the question of reflexivity, Hammersley and Atkinson observe: 'It is also important to recognise that research is an active process, in which accounts of the world are produced through selective observation and theoretical interpretation of what is seen, through

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<sup>161</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, p.119.



asking particular questions and interpreting what is said in reply.’<sup>162</sup> Furthermore: ‘Given the reflexivity of social inquiry, it is vital to recognise that ethnographers construct the accounts of the social world to be found in ethnographic texts, rather than those accounts simply mirroring reality.’<sup>163</sup>

As a researcher who is a participant, dealing with an insider/outsider status, one has to find ways in which one deals with ‘slippage’, where the boundaries between these positions begin to blur. We can do this by continuing to be reflexive throughout the research process. As Mautner and Doucet argue, ‘reflexivity means reflecting upon and understanding our own personal, political and intellectual autobiographies as researchers and making explicit where we are located in relation to our research respondents’.<sup>164</sup> On the insider/outsider debate, Collins observes that such a dichotomy:

assumes certain things about the self and about society and essentializes both. It implies a unified and unitary self which is largely unchanging and metaphorizes society in a very simplistic way, rather as a series of buildings, each with a single door which serves as both entrance and exit: either one is in or one is out, and if one is in one building, one cannot at the same time be in another.’<sup>165</sup>

But reflexivity also poses its own challenges to a researcher. Whilst reflection is necessary, there is also the danger that all we do is reflect on our position as researcher and what the research means to us, forgetting that there are others involved in our research. Collins proposes an alternative in which the self of the researcher is ‘a dynamic

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<sup>162</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, p.18.

<sup>163</sup> Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, p.239.

<sup>164</sup> Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet, "Reflections on a Voice-Centred Relational Method: Analysing Maternal and Domestic Voices," *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, ed. Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000). p.121.

<sup>165</sup> Collins, "Connecting Anthropology and Quakerism: Transcending the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy." p.91.

and multiplex self.' Similar to the position Doniger suggests, whereby we need to realise that both researcher and subject are multi vocal, Collins sees the researcher 'comprising a multitude of voices, we each become simultaneously insiders and outsiders.'<sup>166</sup>

### **Subjectivity and research**

Acknowledging our place within the research process and the effect we may have on it is vital. As already pointed out, my own reluctance to confront difficult issues has had a direct impact on the results of this research. I am also an atheist who studies the religious lives of others – a situation which lends itself to other problems regarding subjectivity. In a section entitled 'The Observer Doing', Dubisch talks about the practical problems of researching religious belief and practice, in particular if one is not an 'insider' of the particular faith being observed, in her case Greek Orthodox. She asked 'what should I actually do at the church?'<sup>167</sup>

This was similar to what I experienced myself at St Mary's when it became apparent I could not simply sit at the back, observing. When I first attended church, I did sit at the back trying to remain inconspicuous but I was invited by other people to join them at the front. It would have looked ridiculous and somewhat rude if I had not joined in. Dubisch decides to compromise and takes part in certain aspects of ritual, such as lighting candles, but not others, such as genuflecting: 'These rituals, over time and through fieldwork, became part of my own history, my own memories, so that they are – as experiences – now part of my own identity. I would not argue, however, that the familiarity that such occasions acquired for me was the same as it would be for a Greek Orthodox pilgrim.'<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Collins, "Connecting Anthropology and Quakerism: Transcending the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy." p.91.

<sup>167</sup> Dubisch, In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine. p.110.

<sup>168</sup> Dubisch, In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine.p.111.

Likewise, I realise that by performing the same actions as members of the congregation, although I might superficially 'fit in', as a non-believer and as a researcher, my actions do not have the same meaning as it does for the congregation.

When I was taking part in services, it was often difficult to observe without looking too conspicuous. For example, when it was time to pray, most people bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Initially I did neither, but felt so uncomfortable not doing the same that I also began to do this. Nevertheless, it only took a couple of weeks before I was not only comfortable to perform these actions, but that it became increasingly easy to do so, remembering the words to the liturgy, remembering when to stand up, to move around the space such as during Communion. Wanting to fit in and not look like an outsider during my observations also meant that taking field notes was sometimes difficult. It would have been impossible, if not impolite, to take notes during services and other activities at church. This left me having to complete my notes after the fact, sometimes several hours later (due to the practicalities of travelling to and from church). This time delay therefore had a negative impact on the quality of those notes.

Blanes also discusses the issue of how one's own beliefs, or as the case may be, lack of faith may affect the research process. For Blanes, whether to reveal one's atheism or not was a very real ethical dilemma:

On the one hand, I thought, if I presented myself as an atheist, I could provoke attitudes of rejection and lack of interest on their behalf towards my scientific project. On the other hand, if I presented myself as a believer of someone willing

to become one, I anticipated an aggressive proselytism and the prospect of maintaining an uncomfortable and ultimately unsustainable façade.<sup>169</sup>

Blanes made the decision to ‘tell the “truth” and describe myself as an atheist’ and found that this decision ‘not only demystified my fears, but also revealed them to be unfounded.’<sup>170</sup> I also made the decision to be honest with people at church if asked about my own religious affiliations and like Blanes, I was likewise relieved and pleased to find that my atheism was not a problem for those I spoke to at church. What I did find difficult was maintaining a neutral position, even when confronted with views I found difficult to hear. I decided that even when faced with such views, I would not join in and give my opinion or challenge these in anyway. I found this very uncomfortable at times but felt it would have made my position as a researcher impossible to maintain if I had joined in with these discussions.

Orsi argues that research is about relationships – the relationships between the researcher and the community where the research is taking place. He came to realise that it would be impossible to remain ‘an objective, distant observer’ as the people he was engaging with began to share their lives with him, and asked him to share his with them: ‘My interlocutors did not let me be invisible, moreover; drawing me out with questions about my life and experience. It is not necessary to become the other in order to see for a moment, the world through his or her eyes. The derogatory, and racist, accusation of “going native” is, like the term *popular religion*, boundary-setting rhetoric that seeks to

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<sup>169</sup> Ruy Llera Blanes, "The Atheist Anthropologist: Believers and Non-Believers in Anthropological Fieldwork," *Social Anthropology* 14.2 (2006). p.225.

<sup>170</sup> Blanes, "The Atheist Anthropologist: Believers and Non-Believers in Anthropological Fieldwork." p.226.

preserve the utter alienness of the other.’<sup>171</sup> For me, remaining objective was also difficult. These difficulties manifest themselves on two levels. Firstly, the subjective position of researcher, even when dealing with texts, is important to recognise. Remaining objective towards a subject that one has been interested in for decades, even before it became an academic project was challenging. The way I hope I have dealt with this is demonstrated in the first half of my research, by casting a critical eye over some of the literature I had been reading for pleasure long before I embarked on this research.

Reinharz argues that ‘personal experience can be the very starting point of a study, the material from which the researcher develops questions’.<sup>172</sup> She rightly cautions however that this position has its limitations and there is the danger of solipsism and projection. If researchers are going to question the notion of objectivity and acknowledge their subjective position, they must be ‘careful to differentiate their “own experience” from the experience of others’.<sup>173</sup> However, she suggests (and I concur) that ‘personal experience can be the very starting point of a study, the material from which the researcher develops questions.’ More problematic was achieving objectivity in the ethnographic research. The difficulties of this were thrown into sharp relief when I was due to give a talk to the St Anne’s Guild and I had to cancel due to a family bereavement. I had to let the people at St Mary’s know what had happened, so they were privy to my life outside of my role as researcher. When I returned to my research the following week, I was told that the priest had included me and my family in their prayers. Despite my atheism, I found this gesture very moving.

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<sup>171</sup> Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959. pp.xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>172</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research. p.260.

<sup>173</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research. pp.261-262.

## **Emotion, rapport and fieldwork**

Adopting a reflexive approach also means acknowledging the emotional aspects of conducting fieldwork. These emotional aspects include both those of the researcher and the people with whom one is doing that research. Sanders argues that 'Emotional experience is central to doing ethnography' and that 'Because experiencing emotion is an unavoidable feature of doing fieldwork, it is most sensible to pay close attention to the emotions displayed by participants and those that are inevitably called forth in the ethnographer as he or she shares in the activities of interest.'<sup>174</sup> For Sanders, paying such close attention to emotions in the research process is important 'because the central (but I would maintain, not the exclusive) goal of fieldwork is to intimately grasp the definitions and interpretations that shape people's behaviour, it is necessary to pay close attention to the emotional elements of the field. Feelings are built into the experiences and cultural definitions that constrain social action.'<sup>175</sup>

Dubisch reveals that:

As part of the blurring of boundaries, and because I believe that emotions can be a valuable source of insight in the practice of anthropology and that "the personal is theoretical", I have sought to use emotion – both my own and others' – in my narrative. Thus I have not isolated my own responses and experiences from other kinds of "data," but rather have sought to integrate them in a way that I hope will allow them to serve as a "window" for the reader as well as a pathway to

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<sup>174</sup> Clinton R. Sanders, "Animal Passions: The Emotional Experience of Doing Ethnography in Animal-Human Interaction Settings," Doing Ethnographic Research: Fieldwork Settings, ed. Scott Grills (London: Sage, 1998). p.185.

<sup>175</sup> Sanders, "Animal Passions: The Emotional Experience of Doing Ethnography in Animal-Human Interaction Settings." p.196.

theoretical insights. Such an approach gives fieldwork itself a central place in the development of anthropological theory.<sup>176</sup>

I admire Dubisch's attempts to try and integrate her emotions into her research. I do not feel as comfortable in doing this within my own research. However, it would have been impossible to conduct this research and not acknowledge such reactions. People talked very openly about the emotional experiences that accompanied religious experiences. They also revealed often very personal stories of family, grief and problems they had experienced. From my own point of view, I was participating in activities that I would not normally do so and had significant reservations about doing so. I was questioning myself all the time during these and my responses to this could not be avoided.

I encountered no hostility from anyone during the time I conducted the fieldwork. On the whole, people were friendly and helpful. It was this friendliness that allowed me to build rapport with people. On the subject of rapport between researcher and the people within the research, Reinharz points out that whilst this may for some researchers be central to the success of the project, others have found this troubling: "Achieving rapport" should not become a burdensome, and sometimes inappropriate, form of "emotion work" feminist researchers must do if they engage in research involving interaction with people.<sup>177</sup> As Reinharz argues sometimes such intimacy is not possible or even appropriate. I would concur with this in relation to my own research. I am an atheist, asking people about their religious beliefs. I was conscious that the people I was speaking with held beliefs or views that I did not, and could not share. Here, emotional intimacy and/or rapport may be difficult.

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<sup>176</sup> Dubisch, In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine.p.6.

<sup>177</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research. p.267

However, this is not to give the impression there were no problems in asking people to talk about their experiences at St Mary's. On one occasion, one person I asked to interview said no; they would like to help me but did not have the time. On another occasion, as I was leaving after a regular mid-week service, I eagerly awaited with pen and notepad, waiting for people I could talk to. A group of older women who regularly attended walked out of the church on their way to the market across the road. I asked them if anyone would be willing to talk to me as part of my research. One person looked away and did not answer. Another asked me what I would like to know and when I explained I would like to know why people chose to come there and any stories of their experiences, one of the group burst out laughing and said 'Because it only takes me five minutes to get here.' We all laughed at this and I explained I did not want to pressure anyone into talking to me. One of the group then said yes, she would be happy to have a chat and gave me her telephone number and we did have a brief conversation over the telephone as she was quite ill at the time.

In her research, Jeanette Rodriguez had asked participants to write written reflections as a means of generating more data and a way of meeting people for interview. I decided to adopt a similar approach and made an announcement at one of the services as to what I was doing and asked people to take part. Unfortunately this did not result in many respondents. Four people chose to complete the written reflections but none wished to be interviewed further on their replies. Data from the written reflections I did receive is included in this research however.

## **Ethics**

I have already touched on some ethical issues in conducting research above, such as the decision to conduct research overtly and the raising of sensitive subject areas.



Consideration of ethical issues is central to the research process. Rodriguez states that we need to remember that the ‘subjects’ on which our research are based are not simply a mass of respondents, therefore scholars must ‘evaluate their theories as applied to living, breathing people with unique psychosocial histories and experiences.’<sup>178</sup>

Confidentiality was an important consideration in this research. The congregation of St Mary’s is a relatively small number of people and the people who I spoke to in the course of this research were a small proportion of that group. Therefore, it would have been relatively easy to identify who was speaking if I had revealed too much information about any individual person. With that in mind, all the comments made, either in interview or in informal conversation, have been attributed anonymously (with the exception of the artist Catharni Stern).

Although I have tried not to edit extracts from taped interviews too much, I have edited where information would compromise confidentiality. I have also included only minimal descriptions of the individual respondents. I have done this partly for confidentiality. I had initially intended to ask for biographical information from each person, (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity and so on), but changed my mind after an incident at the church whereby some members of the congregation expressed their hostility to the constant asking of personal information by public officials such as the local council, the housing association and so on. I realise that this means I cannot provide any sort of comparisons between different groups as to their experiences at the church, which could potentially have been an interesting contributions to my research had it been possible to do so.

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<sup>178</sup> Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women. p.114.

However, I had no wish to upset or antagonise the very people without whom I could not do complete any research so I felt it was a compromise worth making.

## **Summary**

In terms of wider relevance, I hope this study will contribute to the field of black Madonna scholarship to deepen the understanding of this seemingly mysterious subject. I hope it will help to reposition the figure of the black Madonna within a Christian context. There is also a hope that it might contribute in a much wider sense to the understanding of Christianity, and in particular Anglican Christianity, within a multi-faith, multi-cultural community. This research functions as a case study in relation to previous studies in this area. Rather than conduct a comparative study of several sites, I concentrate on this particular one. This shrine has individual attributes that in that it is an urban, small, Anglican parish church with a modern black Madonna statue. It is these attributes that are of interest to the research.

Topics to be addressed include issues raised by previous research as identified at the end of the literature review, in particular the positioning of the black Madonna as a heterodox, esoteric figure; the relationship the laity have with the black Madonna and its shrine and the possible significance of the shrine's pilgrimage day. This research does not attempt to explain the colour of the black Madonna. Nor does it attempt to provide any theological understandings of the black Madonna. Such an approach is beyond the scope of this research. Instead, it examines the ways in which narratives about black Madonnas function. Whether told by the congregation or by other scholars, this research examines how these narratives help to create different interpretations and representations of the black Madonna. In the fieldwork section of my research, by using the concept of lived or everyday religion, I also consider how the collective and individual narratives of

the congregation, with the historical narratives of the church and shrine operate together, creating identities and links between past and present.

### **Chapter Three – Themes and Issues in Black Madonna Writings**

At the end of chapter one, I highlighted how a lack of written records regarding the creation of black Madonnas has left gaps in our knowledge that have become filled with speculation. In reviewing the existing literature, I identified several areas which I argued were in need of further investigation. Firstly, theories suggesting that the origins of the black Madonna lie beyond mainstream Christianity are found throughout the literature in this field. Amongst those who study black Madonnas there appeared to be a willingness not only to accept that such connections exist, but to see the black Madonna as a continuation of these pre-Christian antecedents, rather than just an adaption of them.

Secondly, the black Madonna has been situated as an alternative to the Virgin Mary; to such an extent that in some sections of the literature the black Madonna no longer represents the Virgin Mary at all. Instead, for such writers, the black Madonna represents, in varying combinations, pre-Christian goddesses (especially the Egyptian goddess Isis) and the figure of Mary Magdalene. As I argued in chapter one, by situating the black Madonna in this way, she comes to embody darkness, fertility and female sexuality.

Examining the above themes is relevant to my research because, as I suggested in both chapters one and two, they have rarely been subject to critical scrutiny. One of the main aims of this research, then, is to examine these interpretive, psychoanalytic approaches and to provide a more critical analysis of them. This chapter seeks to address the following: the assumptions made by ‘grand narrative’ approaches which try to offer explanations as to the origins and meanings of the black Madonna; the implications of the interpretations and use made of dark goddesses/black Madonnas; and the way in

which the black Madonna and its associated tropes are constructed as the mysterious ‘other’.

When reviewing writings on the black Madonna, it becomes clear that particular figures – those of Isis and Mary Magdalene – dominate the more interpretive sections of black Madonna literature. These figures are closely connected with one another and with the black Madonna. In my critical examination of black Madonna writings, I look at the ways in which these figures are used and interpreted. In particular these figures are useful in addressing the last two issues mentioned above. However, I would argue that their dominance in the literature also reinforces the problems of grand theory. None of these figures are actually black Madonnas. They are not the Virgin Mary and come from different cultural and historical contexts. Yet at times they become so conflated with the black Madonna, they become inseparable. It is for these reasons that I have included examination of those figures in this thesis.

### **Great Goddesses and Grand Narratives**

This section looks at the influences on those theories that seek to explain the beginnings of the black Madonna. I suggest that there are two main strands that have influenced black Madonna literature. The first strand is the psychoanalytic theories identified in chapter one when discussing the work of Ean Begg and Fred Gustafson. The second draws on previous research into the history of the goddess. As this section will show, these two strands have become connected in the field of goddess scholarship, and by extension the study of black Madonnas. The criticisms that can be aimed at both of these influences are introduced at the end of this section and then continued throughout the remaining sections of the chapter in more detail.

Research into the history of goddess worship, conducted by the likes of Johannes Jakob Bachofen, Jane Harrison, Jacquetta Hawkes and Marija Gimbutas, concluded that there was a matriarchal era in human pre-history and that the primary deity during this period was the 'Great Goddess'.<sup>179</sup> The many facets of the Great Goddess eventually became the separate goddesses that we recognise from Ancient Greece, the Ancient Near East and Ancient Egypt.<sup>180</sup> In *Das Mutterrecht* (Mother Right), for example, published in 1863, Johann Jakob Bachofen argued that the matriarchal age was universal, and could be identified by particular characteristics which included 'religious preference given to the moon over the sun, of the conceiving earth over the fecundating sea, of the dark aspect of death over the luminous aspect of growth, of the dead over the living, of mourning over rejoicing'.<sup>181</sup>

The popularity of these theories continued throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Importantly for the study of black Madonnas, such ideas became influential over psychology. Ronald Hutton points out for example how Neolithic expert Jacquetta Hawkes's work was influential over Erich Neumann and his work on the Great Mother archetype:

It was left to his (Jung's) devoted disciple Erich Neumann, in 1963, to draw upon the apparent consensus among archaeologists to argue that the Great Mother had been a universal religious archetype, representing a vital first stage in the

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<sup>179</sup> I am aware that this history is a long and complex one. With limited space here I have chosen to present a much briefer account and concentrate on those aspects that are most relevant to my research. For a more detailed and critical examination of the development of goddess scholarship see Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Hutton, "The Discovery of the Modern Goddess." Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>180</sup> See Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, who trace the development of the goddess image from the Paleolithic era onwards.

<sup>181</sup> Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen, Mythos ed., vol. LXXXIV (New Jersey and New York: Princeton University Press, 1992). pp.76-77.

development of the human psyche (Neumann, 1963, 1964). A circular process was thus created, because the archaeologists had convinced Neumann and could now, led by Jacquetta Hawkes, claim that Jungian psychology had proved that the Great Goddess was a universal human archetype, removing any remaining doubts about her worship in prehistory.<sup>182</sup>

This connection is important to black Madonna literature. The black Madonna is seen as another manifestation of the mother archetype, in the tradition of the Great Goddess of the ancient world. In this respect, the black Madonna, like the Mother Archetype, is a universal figure. Fred Gustafson, for example, describes the black Madonna as ‘archetypal and her power thus exists in every person and every culture’<sup>183</sup>. The black Madonna is therefore a ‘touchstone in our understanding the archetypal dark feminine.’<sup>184</sup> Gustafson’s assertion that black Madonnas appear in all cultures is illustrative of the problems in these writings in that there is an assumption of universality, not only in representation but also in meanings.

Theories of Matriarchy and the Great Goddess found another, receptive audience amongst some sections of the feminist movement in the late 1960s – a popularity that continues right up to the present. In her book *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, Cynthia Eller describes how the above theories have been important in the development of the feminist spirituality movement:

However varied the specifics, feminist spirituality always relies on an interest on the feminine, or at least gender, to sustain its system of symbols, beliefs, and

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<sup>182</sup> Hutton, "The Discovery of the Modern Goddess." pp.95-96.

<sup>183</sup> Gustafson, *The Black Madonna*. p.118.

<sup>184</sup> Gustafson, *The Black Madonna*.p.xiv.

practices. Finally, much of the feminist spiritual imagination is given over to speculation about how gender relations have been structured over the history of the human race. This “sacred history” is an ongoing reconstruction of Western history according to which prehistoric societies worshiped goddesses, and were possibly matriarchal as well, until they were replaced by patriarchal societies, which are today the status quo worldwide.<sup>185</sup>

It was the work of archeologist Marija Gimbutas that really caught the imagination of the feminist spirituality movement. In books such as *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500BC* and *The Language of the Goddess*, Gimbutas argued that the culture she called ‘Old Europe’ was characterized by a dominance of woman in society and worship of ‘a Goddess incarnating the creative principle as Source and Giver of All.’<sup>186</sup> This society was ‘matrifocal and probably matrilinear, agricultural and sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful’.<sup>187</sup> Gimbutas argued that she was attempting to interpret the objects found and described her approach as ‘archeomythology, a field that includes archeology, comparative mythology and folklore.’<sup>188</sup> She wrote that the items being analysed ‘represent the grammar and syntax of a kind of metalanguage by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted. They reveal the basic world-view of Old European (pre-Indo-European) culture’.<sup>189</sup>

Gimbutas's interpretive, archeomythological approach has also been influential over black Madonna research. For example, Chiavola Birnbaum frequently cites Gimbutas.

For Chiavola Birnbaum, Gimbutas’s research:

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<sup>185</sup> Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, pp.3-4.

<sup>186</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: Myths and Cult Images* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982). p.9.

<sup>187</sup> Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: Myths and Cult Images*.

<sup>188</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989).p.xviii

<sup>189</sup> Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*. p.xv



celebrated the sacredness of everything on earth: life energies of men and women and the cycle of seasons from birth to maturity to death and regeneration.

Symbols of the sacredness of all life in Old Europe were spirals, snakes, whorls, phalluses, and eggs. In these societies without hierarchy, women and men were equal, and different.<sup>190</sup>

Gimbutas herself wrote about black Madonnas that they demonstrated the relationship between the fecund soil and Mother Earth. Gimbutas argued that although the colour black was allied in Christian iconography with death and evil, by contrast in Old Europe, blackness was:

the colour of fertility and soil. The fact that black madonnas throughout the world are focal points for pilgrimages, are regarded as miracle workers, and are among the most highly venerated of all Christian religious symbols indicates that the blackness of these miraculous madonnas still evokes profound and meaningful images and associations for devotees.<sup>191</sup>

It is noteworthy here that Gimbutas acknowledges that the black Madonna is worshipped as a Christian symbol, but nevertheless she suggests that the positive meanings associated with colour black come from a pre-Christian era, in contrast with the negative associations of blackness in Christianity. The meaning of blackness in Christianity is a subject to which I shall return later in this chapter.

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<sup>190</sup> Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy. p.22.

<sup>191</sup> Gimbutas, The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization. p.144.

One aspect of both psychoanalytic and goddess theories which deserves critical attention is the undercurrent of gender and racial differences that lie beneath the surface of the theories. Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that:

Racial hierarchy lurks around the edges of much of this thought about ancient matriarchy and the rise of patriarchy, linked to gender hierarchy. Inferior racial and religious groups were seen as less rational and less masculine, more emotional, somatic, and feminine.<sup>192</sup>

For example, although Bachofen proposed a matriarchal stage, he saw women as inherently inferior to men. In a rational, advanced Western Europe, matriarchy was overthrown to make way for patriarchy. Matriarchy was defined by the inferior 'the law of the material corporeal, not of higher spiritual life'.<sup>193</sup> He proposed that in some parts of the Mediterranean, the Near East and Africa however, people were not advanced enough to develop further. Matriarchy 'originated in the East and was foreign to the true Occidental spirit'.<sup>194</sup> Bachofen's theory, Ruether argues, inscribed an essential hierarchy of West over East, men over women; 'thus he suggests an essentialism that differentiates Western men from Asian and African men and from all women in general'.<sup>195</sup>

Hutton also points to the inherent conservatism and distrust of modernity in some of these theories and their proponents. Both Jane Harrison and Jacquetta Hawkes were women scholars who wrote about matriarchies but were certainly not feminists. Hawkes, for example, 'idealised a woman-centred Neolithic because she believed that women were the great forces for conservatism in the world. Her two great hatreds were science

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<sup>192</sup> Ruether, Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History. p.272.

<sup>193</sup> Bachofen, Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen. p.78.

<sup>194</sup> Ruether, Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History. p.256.

<sup>195</sup> Ruether, Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History. p.256.

and socialism.’ Harrison was against any involvement of women in politics and refused to support women’s suffrage.<sup>196</sup> It is surprising therefore that researchers such as Anne Baring and Jules Cashford<sup>197</sup> for example, who are clearly writing from a feminist spirituality perspective, can draw on theories whose proponents were so conservative, without making any reference to the contradictions or problems this may pose.

With regards to issues of race in the use of psychoanalytic theories, any controversies over Jung’s own political views, such as the accusations of racism, fascism and anti-Semitism levelled at him, are never considered by those writers within black Madonna literature who praise his influence over their work so highly.<sup>198</sup> To not even acknowledge that these controversies exist when one is writing about difference, blackness and ‘the other’ is highly problematic. Even a writer like Chiavola Birnbaum, who is more sensitive to issues of racism in her works, does not mention any problems with adopting a Jungian approach to black Madonnas. I suggest that rather than seeing the black Madonna as blank slate, we should instead acknowledge that meanings given to the black Madonna are dependent on social, historical and cultural processes. I would argue that this is indicative of a problem that I have pointed out repeatedly in reviewing black Madonna literature – a lack of reflective questioning of the approaches and theories being brought to bear. In the later sections of this chapter, I address this problem in more detail when discussing the figure of Mary Magdalene.

Despite any criticisms, ideas about the development of goddess worship have remained resilient. As Nicole Loraux has observed:

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<sup>196</sup> Hutton, "The Discovery of the Modern Goddess." p.96.

<sup>197</sup> Baring and Cashford, The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image.

<sup>198</sup> For a critical approach to these controversies see Robert Ellwood, The Politics of Myth: A Study of C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999). For a defence of Jung see Anthony Stevens, Jung: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). In particular see pp.140-151.

The maternal Great Goddess is a fantasy, a powerful fantasy with an astonishing capacity to resist criticism. It unites militant proponents of matriarchy and worshippers of a prehistoric goddess with great powers of consolation. The common ground that certain feminists have managed to stake out on this issue with certain distinguished academics is, to say the least, surprising.<sup>199</sup>

Gimbutas's popularity, for example, has withstood any criticisms on the grounds outlined in this chapter, and she continues to be a popular source of information on the subject of goddesses and pre-Christian religions.<sup>200</sup> Criticism of Gimbutas's work has caused controversy amongst feminists. This is demonstrated by the hostile reaction to Cynthia Eller's book *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*<sup>201</sup> in which she questioned not just the methods used by Gimbutas but also questioned the entire notion of a matriarchal past and its relevance to women.

Eller has also questioned the development of black Madonna writing in relation to goddesses. She is quite prepared to accept that there are cases of syncretism, as suggested by Moss and Cappanari's work on black Madonnas. What she finds problematic (and I concur with her critique) is the notion of one grand theory of the 'dark mother' where dark goddesses 'as isolated as ancient Egypt, ancient India, Medieval Europe, eighteenth century Hawaii and contemporary China'<sup>202</sup> are all aspects of the same mother goddess.

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<sup>199</sup> Nicole Loraux, "What Is a Goddess?," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *A History of Women in the West, Volume 1: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, ed. Pauline Schmitt Pantel (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992). p.36.

<sup>200</sup> For example, a documentary entitled *Signs Out of Time* was produced in 2003 on Gimbutas and her work.

<sup>201</sup> Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Jane Marler for example calls Eller's work 'snide and divisive'. See Jane Marler, "The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's 'Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory'," *Feminist Theology* 14.2 (2006).

<sup>202</sup> Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother." p.372.

Eller argues that this concept of the Dark Mother is largely an invention by the likes of Carl Jung and those who have been influenced by theories of 'universal patterns found in many varied religions.'<sup>203</sup> If one is able to accept 'the quasi-Jungian notion that people everywhere are working out the same religious ideas with a single set of symbols then it is easy to accept the concept of the Dark Mother.'<sup>204</sup>

I would agree with Eller that universalist ideas regarding the origins of religious beliefs and symbols need to be challenged. One of the main oversights of such an approach is to ignore the particular aspects of a symbol or practice. It may be that the differences potentially tell us more than the similarities and provide us with an even richer understanding of the black Madonna. This would help to avoid what Eller describes as 'a number of different figures from different religions, having local and contextual meanings all being conflated together on the basis of a superficial commonality: the colour of their skin.'<sup>205</sup> As I demonstrate in the latter half of this chapter, the results of universalising of figures based purely on their 'darkness' leads to an 'othering' which is highly questionable and problematic when considered in relation to theories of race and gender.

The approaches to goddess scholarship discussed above have had a lasting impact on the study of black Madonnas. Although original research into goddess history did not concentrate on the black Madonna specifically, some of the methodological approaches used have found their way into black Madonna research. These approaches include the use of comparative methodology, whereby so-called 'dark goddesses' from around the world are discussed as though all of them had comparable origins and meanings. Black Madonnas themselves are similarly compared and represented as having common

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<sup>203</sup> Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother." p.372.

<sup>204</sup> Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother." p.372.

<sup>205</sup> Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother." p.372.

origins. It is this central position accorded the goddess in black Madonna writings which led to the assertion that the black Madonna has its origins in pre-Christian beliefs.

### **The ‘Paganisation of Christianity’**

The emphasis on the pre-Christian has led to black Madonnas being largely removed from a Christian context. Mainstream Christianity, when mentioned in this literature, is nearly always portrayed negatively. For example, Deana Weibel accompanied a group of women on a tour of black Madonna sites in Southern France, organised by ‘The Sisterhood of the Goddess’. Weibel found open hostility to traditional forms of Christianity, in particular to the figure of Christ:

One [of the tour’s participants] told me of entering Rocamadour’s basilica, and then walking right out of it when she saw Jesus on the cross. Other examples include the women’s refusal to participate in the cheer for the ‘resurrected Christ’ during the procession at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer...Christian hymns were sung with any lyrical reference to Jesus replaced with humming.<sup>206</sup>

I found Weibel’s observation most telling. Whilst reviewing the literature for my research, something that became very noticeable was the lack of comment on the black Christ child that accompanied the black Madonna. It is impossible to conclude as to whether the negative portrayal of Christianity is either the cause or effect of this omission.

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<sup>206</sup> Weibel, "The New Age and the Old World: The Interpretation and Use of European Shrines by 'Religious Creatives'." p.85.

I would argue that the consequences of the black Madonna being seen as an aspect of this universal goddess is that the black Madonna as the Christian Virgin Mary is sidelined and the significance of Mary as the mother of Christ is made redundant. In relating black Madonnas largely in terms of their pre-Christian origins in this way they become removed from the context of the Christian shrines in which they are now found. As this theory has become a popular one, the fact that the black Madonna is the object of Christian worship and pilgrimage has become somewhat lost.

Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh's work on the black Madonna in the early 1980s provides a good example of this sidelining. In their first article on Black Madonnas, entitled *Virgins with a Pagan Past*, they dealt with the connections between black Madonnas and goddesses. In the article, they describe the black Madonna and beliefs associated with her as:

not only non-Christian in both nature and origin – they are clearly pagan in character. Many of the Black Madonnas are associated with sexuality, procreation and fertility – hardly traditional qualities attributed to the Virgin Mary.<sup>207</sup>

Baigent and Leigh seem unaware of the intense devotion accorded the Virgin Mary within the Catholic tradition, regardless of her colour, and how this devotion manifested itself in the prayers and intercessions asked from her, many of which were specifically related to matters around fertility and childbirth. For example, Marina Warner gives numerous examples, where the Virgin can be found in a 'maternal and midwife aspect'.<sup>208</sup> Warner writes how:

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<sup>207</sup> Baigent and Leigh, "Virgins with a Pagan Past." p.65  
Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (London: Picador Books, 1990). p.275.

In miracle plays, which by the fourteenth century used much ingenious Stagecraft – real pools for crusaders’ boats and real fire for martyrs’ pyres – the stories of the Virgin’s midwifery were extremely popular and vividly re-enacted. The actor would heave and groan, while the Virgin Mary in attendance encouraged him roundly. At the appropriate moment, she would bend down and draw from between the actor’s legs a doll wrapped in swaddling clothes.<sup>209</sup>

In his work *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*, Ronald Hutton suggests that there are some examples of the incorporation of pagan elements into Christianity, and he uses some black Madonnas as an example of this:

There are some notable examples of direct continuity. Some of the Black Madonnas of Italy and Sicily occupy churches upon sites of notable temples to Ceres and Cybele, goddesses of fertility, and their cults are associated with the growth and harvesting of crops. Their colour may be intended to increase their identification with the soil. The famous virgin of Chartres Cathedral in France is a figure taken from a fourth century pagan altar.<sup>210</sup>

However, although it is possible to draw direct connections between some black Madonnas and pre-Christian religions, we should not conclude this is the case for all black Madonnas. Monique Scheer points out that we should look at the context in which an individual black Madonna is venerated in order to de-mystify them. The meanings once given to an image can be lost and this makes interpreting such images all the more difficult. We should not, therefore, assume that the meanings attached to a shrine have

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<sup>209</sup> Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. p.277.

<sup>210</sup> Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*. p.284.



remained constant throughout its history.<sup>211</sup> There appears to be a willingness in black Madonna scholarship to universalize because, it is said, so many cultures have black or dark goddesses, there must be a) a common source and b) some sort of human need for these. There is also an emphasis on the comparison of goddesses from differing cultures and across historical periods on the basis that their blackness or darkness must have similar meanings.

This point is illustrated by the work of Eloise McKinney-Johnson and Danita Redd on the connections between the Egyptian goddess Isis and the black Madonna. Both see Isis as instrumental in the development of the black Madonna in Europe. McKinney-Johnson suggests that in particular, the image of Isis suckling her infant son Horus is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus, arguing that: 'She is thus, the prototype for similar depictions of the Christian Madonna and her Christ child. She is also, the original pieta or suffering mother'.<sup>212</sup>

Redd traces the origins of Black Madonnas in Europe from Isis via the Byzantine icons and suggests a connection between artistic representations and the reality of an African presence in Europe:

The European Black Madonnas demonstrate the diffusion of African Isis into that continent. This diffusion can be investigated through the early development of

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<sup>211</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries." p.38

<sup>212</sup> Eloise McKinney-Johnson, "Egypt's Isis: The Original Black Madonna," Black Women in Antiquity, ed. Ivan Van Sertima, vol. Vol.6, No.1, Journal of African Civilizations (New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishing, 1987).p.67

Byzantine Christian iconography; and the adoption by the European Orthodox Christians of various Black goddesses to represent the Virgin Mary.<sup>213</sup>

Redd sees the rigid, flat, two-dimensional style of the Byzantine Black Madonna icons as reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian styles of art. Byzantium existed on the site of present day Istanbul. In 330 C.E., Constantine chose the site for Constantinople, capital of the Roman Empire. In 640 C.E. artists fled Byzantium from Islamic invaders and went to Europe where their style began to spread. It became particularly popular in Eastern Europe and Russia. Redd claims that accounts of these early icons of the Virgin describe them as having 'dark skin and Ethiopian facial features'. She cites the opinion of Afrocentric art historian, James Brunson, noting 'that the African influence on Byzantine art can be observed by the elongated faces, fingers and figured of portrait images'.<sup>214</sup> .

Redd and McKinney Johnson argue that the presence of Isis in Europe is a positive connection between Europe and Africa, reflecting a history of an African presence in Europe that is often ignored or marginalised: 'Isis, her husband, Osiris, and their son, Horus, a divine Black family of Afro-Ethiopian/Afro-Egyptian origin, have exerted an outstanding positive influence upon world history and world civilization'.<sup>215</sup> The black Madonna by extension becomes part of that presence. Redd in particular argues for a direct link between the black Madonna and 'real' Africans:

Many anthropologists attribute the blackness of the European Madonnas to their fertility quality, with black representing the Earth... Unquestionably, not all so-called "Black Madonnas" are not actually black. The skin tones range in various

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<sup>213</sup> Danita Redd, "Black Madonnas of Europe: Diffusion of the African Isis," Black Women in Antiquity, ed. Ivan Van Sertima, vol. Vol.6, No.1, Journal of African Civilizations (New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishing, 1987). p.174.

<sup>214</sup> Redd, "Black Madonnas of Europe: Diffusion of the African Isis." p.175.

<sup>215</sup> McKinney-Johnson, "Egypt's Isis: The Original Black Madonna." p.71.

shades of light brown to very black, the same variations seen in the skin pigmentation of people of African ancestry.<sup>216</sup>

Redd and McKinney-Johnson's suggestions are intriguing and their work provides an interesting contribution to the study of the black Madonna in a field that is dominated mostly by white scholars. But as the artists who created these images leave no written records of their work, it is impossible to say how accurate such suggestions may be and Redd and McKinney-Johnson make the assumption that direct lines of meaning can be traced across centuries and continents.

Hutton suggests that the emphasis on the pagan origins of Christianity has been somewhat exaggerated and Christianity itself has become 'paganised':

It is important not to take too far the process of identification of the old religion with the new one. There is a powerful tendency, which began with Protestant reformers, was continued by nineteenth century anti-clericalists and is preserved by many modern writers, to assume that medieval Christianity was simply paganism given a thin layer of scripture.<sup>217</sup>

He argues that whilst some activities or ideas may have survived the advent of Christianity, we cannot really label this as paganism. These are now the activities of Christians 'who had detached them from any previous religious context'.<sup>218</sup> Hutton also argues that studies in folklore practices have demonstrated the continuation of magical practices alongside Christianity without any contradiction for those who practise either.

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<sup>216</sup> Redd, "Black Madonnas of Europe: Diffusion of the African Isis." p.175

<sup>217</sup> Hutton, The Pagan Religions of the British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy. p.286

<sup>218</sup> Hutton, The Pagan Religions of the British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy. p.293.

However, he points out that this is not the same as a pagan tradition remaining alongside Christianity, or having any influence over its development.

Hutton himself is not hostile to modern pagan beliefs; he simply points out that it is impossible for any modern groups to claim an ancient pedigree. Hutton's theories are primarily based on evidence from pre-Christian religions in the British Isles. However, they are useful in trying to explain how an activity, such as the use of a spring or well, has continued from one religion to another. Elements from that previous religion can still be found but they are now an integrated part of the new one. I would argue that a similar assertion might be made about black Madonnas. There is evidence that some current black Madonna shrines were once dedicated to pre-Christian goddesses, but to suggest that these shrines provide a direct link between the two in the minds of the congregations or function in the same way is misleading. One of the reasons for my choosing to conduct fieldwork at a black Madonna shrine and interview was that the congregation was directly influenced by such assumptions.

### **Black Madonna as 'Other'**

Within the sections of the literature that draw on an interpretive approach to the black Madonna, a dualism is created between the white Madonna who represents Church hierarchy, obedience and passivity, and the black Madonna who represents 'the other', the repression of the feminine, the power of female sexuality and the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This positioning occurs, I would suggest, as a result of the influences identified earlier in the chapter. As I argued in the previous section, a consequence of the connection between the black Madonna and goddesses has been the separation between the figure of the black Madonna and the figure of the Virgin Mary. Coming out of a

feminist spirituality movement which has been critical of mainstream forms of Christianity, this interpretation of the black Madonna sees both its origins and its symbolism as outside of this mainstream. The dividing of the black Madonna from the Virgin Mary has left the latter as representing all that is wrong with mainstream Christianity. For example, Chiavola Birnbaum sees black Madonnas as:

differing from white madonnas, who may be said to embody Church doctrine of obedience and patience, and differing in shades of dark, what all black Madonnas have in common is location on or near archaeological evidence of the pre-Christian woman divinity, and the popular perception that they are black. Elusive, they are frequently removed from religious and political implication by art historians, who call them “Byzantine” and by the church hierarchy, which has “retouched” several of them white.<sup>219</sup>

The black Madonna instead is positioned as a figure of liberation from the patriarchy of the Church. It is argued that the black Madonna symbolises feminine sexuality and power in such a way that a white Madonna simply cannot. Perceived Church hostility to black Madonnas is cited as proof of this symbolism. For Chiavola Birnbaum, blackness is central to this idea of an opposition to church hierarchy and an alternative spirituality.<sup>220</sup> Here the position of the black Madonna as the ‘dark other’ is represented as a positive. However, I suggest that this othering of the black Madonna needs to be interrogated much more thoroughly as this is further complicated by the relationship in the literature between literal and symbolic blackness.

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<sup>219</sup> Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy. p.3.

<sup>220</sup> Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy. p.3.

There has been some previous criticism of the above approaches. Eller's critique has largely concentrated on use of dark goddesses by white women in the feminist spirituality movement. I would argue that her critique of these approaches has a wider application to other black Madonna researchers. Eller acknowledges that the intentions of scholars are non-racist and these intentions have sometimes been accepted as such, citing the work of Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum as an example. But she is sceptical of the use of dark goddesses by white women as a solution to racism and suggests that 'in some cases, worship of the so-called "Dark Mother" functions as a reassertion of white privilege'.<sup>221</sup> Charting the use of the dark goddesses by the feminist spirituality movement, Eller shows how the early days of the movement saw an embracing of a range of goddess figures, of all colours and from many different traditions. However, there was a backlash against these appropriations from women of colour:

women of colour told white spiritual feminists that their worship of black goddesses was an unacceptable appropriation of religious resources not their own, and furthermore, that racial identities were not just so many delightfully different flavours skimming the surface of underlying femaleness.<sup>222</sup>

Eller notes another shift in the last decade with the discovery of the European black Madonnas by the feminist spirituality movement, a 'discovery on their own cultural turf'.<sup>223</sup> She suggests that initially, early spiritual feminists were not particularly interested in black Madonnas as they were representations of the Virgin Mary, a

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<sup>221</sup> Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother." p.368.

<sup>222</sup> Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother." p.368.

<sup>223</sup> Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother." p.368.

problematic figure for many feminists. However, the figure of the black Madonna has become a powerful symbol for many women in the feminist movement.<sup>224</sup>

Although writers in this field aware of the negative associations with blackness, as demonstrated by the earlier quote from Gimbutas on black Madonnas, there does not appear to be any discussion as to the complexities of attributing particular qualities with particular colours, regardless of the intentions behind these attributions. For example, Richard Dyer points out that blackness and specifically blackness in terms of skin colour, has been associated with sexuality, dirt and the body in ways that contrast with the spiritual, pure representations of whiteness.<sup>225</sup>

In *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Jean Devisse and Jean Marie Courtès examine the relationship between blackness, race and Christianity and how this influenced art in Western Europe. Their work demonstrates a complicated relationship between symbolism and reality. Devisse suggests that:

Christian exegesis and popular prejudice put together a stable image in which blackness was a sign of evil. While this was not a matter of conscious hostility to black people, the picture impressed upon the Western European mind was added to the ancient tradition, with the result that the black and his land were thought of as abnormal elements in creation.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> See for example the numerous chapters on the black Madonna in Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, ed., *She Is Everywhere: An Anthology of Writing in Womanist/Feminist Spirituality* (New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: iUniverse Inc, 2005).

<sup>225</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>226</sup> Jean Devisse, *The Image of the Black in Western Art Vo.2. From the Early Christian Era to the 'Age of Discovery'. Part 1: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1979). pp.59-60

Courtès and Devisse argue, beginning with Patristic literature, blackness is explicitly linked with sin, folly and with ignorance 'a lack of knowledge from which sins proceed.'<sup>227</sup> Courtès gives examples of demons, 'adjutants of the Prince of Darkness'<sup>228</sup> mentioned in the Patristic writings sent to tempt saints, who are black. Various described as a black youth, a huge Ethiopian, an Ethiopian girl, black imps, an ugly black youth, an ugly, evil smelling Ethiopian woman. Later, in the High Middle Ages, Devisse describes how the Devil and his minions were represented in dark colours and the tradition arose of portraying executioners as black.<sup>229</sup>

They continue their examination through to the philosophy and art of the High Middle Ages where the 'linking together of the four ideas – black, other, sinner, dangerous – runs through all the manifestations of medieval Christian thought.'<sup>230</sup> Throughout Western Europe blackness 'exerted a kind of fascination, complex and contradictory indeed, upon the European consciousness.'<sup>231</sup> The contradictory nature of this fascination is reflected in the fact that there were representations of blackness that went beyond the simplistic notions of black equalling sin or evil. Figures such as Prester John, St.Maurice, the Magi and the Queen of Sheba were sometimes depicted as black or dark skinned and occupied important positions in the Christian tradition.

Courtès and Devisse do not mention the figure of the black Madonna, but I would argue that this complex fascination of blackness in association with holiness may go in some

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<sup>227</sup> Jean Marie Courtès, "Introduction: The Theme of 'Ethiopia' and 'Ethiopians' in Patristic Literature," The Image of the Black in Western Art. Vol.2 from the Early Christian Era to the 'Age of Discovery'. Part 1: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1979). p.19

<sup>228</sup> Courtès, "Introduction: The Theme of 'Ethiopia' and 'Ethiopians' in Patristic Literature." p.19

<sup>229</sup> Devisse, The Image of the Black in Western Art Vo.2. From the Early Christian Era to the 'Age of Discovery'. Part 1: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood. p.61

<sup>230</sup> Devisse, The Image of the Black in Western Art Vo.2. From the Early Christian Era to the 'Age of Discovery'. Part 1: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood. p.61

<sup>231</sup> Devisse, The Image of the Black in Western Art Vo.2. From the Early Christian Era to the 'Age of Discovery'. Part 1: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood. p.119



way to explain the need by some writers to produce ever more speculative explanations. Once again we return to the comments in chapter one, that described the black Madonna as ugly and the repulsion and disgust felt by observers on seeing these images. I agree with Monique Scheer's point that the mysteriousness of the black Madonna as highlighted in so much of the existing literature is a consequence of such ambiguities and complexities.

Although black Madonnas are sometimes associated with concepts such as wisdom,<sup>232</sup> they are more often associated with corporeal qualities such as fertility and sexuality. The problems this raises are illustrated by the connections between the black Madonna and the figure of Mary Magdalene. Situating Mary Magdalene, a figure already associated with sin and sexuality, as a black or dark-skinned woman, even when the intention is not to denigrate, is highly questionable if writers proposing this do not reflect on the implications of their assertions. The already controversial suggestion of a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is given an added frisson by her being black. As bell hooks comments:

The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream culture.<sup>233</sup>

Claiming that the black Madonna is really a portrayal of Mary Magdalene and not the Virgin Mary is yet another example of 'othering'. The intention by the likes of Lynn Picknett is to portray Mary Magdalene as an empowering figure. I suggest that by not

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<sup>232</sup> See for example Matthews, Sophia - Goddess of Wisdom, Bride of God (New Revised Edition).

<sup>233</sup> hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation. p.21.

reflecting on the possible problems this might pose, their attempts fall short of this aim. As Patricia Hill Collins asserts, such a dichotomy 'categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another'.<sup>234</sup> Such categories are not 'complementary counterparts – they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition of opposites'.<sup>235</sup> In this process, one element of the pairing becomes 'objectified as the Other and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled'.<sup>236</sup> Similarly, Valerie Smith argues that women and women of colour in particular become associated with a physical or material world that is deemed inferior to the spiritual or intellectual,<sup>237</sup> producing images of black women that are wholly negative, contributing to their objectification. As Janell Hobson points out, black women have been subjected to 'a history of enslavement, colonial conquest and ethnographic exhibition' and the black female body has been labelled 'grotesque, strange, unfeminine, lascivious and obscene.'<sup>238</sup> I would suggest therefore a contradiction at the heart of some black Madonna research. Authors such as Begg and Chiavola Birnbaum write about alternatives to and liberation from mainstream Christianity and yet it can be argued that by 'othering' the black Madonna, they are perpetuating a dualism that is may not be liberating at all.

Although the literature is dominated by white, European and American writers, we should not dismiss all interest in the black Madonna as white colonialist fantasies. As Redd and McKinney Johnson have suggested, the black Madonna could function as a means of addressing areas of history that do not otherwise get attention. Writers of African-American and Latin-American backgrounds who do write about the black

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<sup>234</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.68.

<sup>235</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.69.

<sup>236</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p.69.

<sup>237</sup> Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'," *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

<sup>238</sup> Hobson, "'The Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body."

Madonna tell moving accounts of this image that do reflect wider issues of race. For example, Necia Harkless explains that the black Madonna has always been a part of her life. She recounts how during the First World War, her father was stationed in France:

Since Paris was off limits for all African American soldiers, my father had to find a place to worship south of Paris. Dad worshipped in the Great Marian Sanctuary of Notre-Dame De Myans. On the back of the postcard my father wrote "My Love, This is the Black Madonna as she stands on the altar of the old church today. Everything is pure gold only her face is black." I myself made a pilgrimage to Myans in 1994. The message over the entrance read: "Then saith He to the disciple: Behold Thy Mother."<sup>239</sup>

She goes on to tell how as a child she thought her mother 'was a Black Madonna and I would grow up to be one.'<sup>240</sup> The story of Harkless's father finding a black image in a church at time of segregation is powerful example of the importance of including the voices of those who have worshipped at a black Madonna shrine.

## Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an examination of the more speculative claims made in the existing literature and to draw out the implications of these assumptions. This was in part because as I have argued earlier, a critical engagement with these sections of the existing literature was for the most part absent. This chapter

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<sup>239</sup> Necia Harkless, "The Black Madonnas in My Life," *She Is Everywhere: An Anthology of Writing in Womanist/Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum (New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: iUniverse, 2005), p.262.

<sup>240</sup> Harkless, "The Black Madonnas in My Life." p.262.

sought to examine the consequences of previous assumptions about the origins of the black Madonna and the meanings attributed to them. The problem with these assumptions is they have not only contributed to a universalising of the origins and meanings of the black Madonna, but also created a binary between the black Madonna and the Virgin Mary whereby the black Madonna has become positioned as the 'other'.

The result of engaging with the issues in this chapter has also directly influenced the remaining part of this thesis. The figure of the black Madonna is a complex one, and although there are issues to be examined critically, the black Madonna still remains a powerful symbol. Throughout the literature, there are voices of the researchers and scholars giving their interpretations of the black Madonna. I would argue that some of these interpretations have been problematic, such as the linking of the black Madonna with Mary Magdalene for example. However, there are still absences; most pertinently, I would argue, from the worshippers at the black Madonna shrines. What made the work by Rodriguez and Weibel so engaging was the inclusion of the voices of worshippers, both Christian and non-Christian. I hope that by including the voices of worshippers at St Mary's in my own research project, my research will make a real contribution towards redressing this imbalance.

## **Chapter Four -‘You can feel the centuries of prayer that have gone on in there’: History, narrative and place at St Mary’s**

In the preceding chapters, I highlighted several issues when examining the previous literature on black Madonnas. Firstly, there has been an over-emphasis on the pre-Christian origins of the black Madonna rather than as a Christian symbol. Secondly, in some sections of the literature – in particular those that adopt a psychoanalytic approach to black Madonnas – there has been a lack of engagement with people who actually worship at black Madonna shrines. Thirdly, the literature has tended to focus on the ‘mystery’ of the black Madonna, making her an ‘other’ when compared to white representations of the Virgin Mary. Fourth, there has been a concentration on black Madonnas in mainland Europe and a lack of research on black Madonnas in the United Kingdom.

However, as scholars such as Jeanette Rodriguez, Monique Scheer and Deana Weibel<sup>241</sup> have demonstrated, it is possible to adopt a different approach in examining the figure of the black Madonna. Rodriguez and Weibel not only concentrate on a particular black Madonna (Our Lady of Guadalupe and Our Lady of Rocamadour respectively), but also include the voices of those who worship these images. Although she does not focus on a particular shrine, Scheer demonstrates that is important we consider the historical and cultural contexts of shrines to avoid making too many generalisations as to their possible meanings.

Over the following four chapters, I aim to address the issues raised above in my own research conducted at St Mary’s Church, Willesden. Drawing on the approaches of

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<sup>241</sup> Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women*, Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries.", Weibel, "The Energy We Call the Goddess: The Religious Creativist Use of a Roman Catholic Shrine.."

Rodriguez and Weibel, I focus on one particular shrine and include material gathered in interviews with members of the congregation. As suggested by Scheer, I consider both the historical and cultural contexts of this shrine and its black Madonna.

Although I gave a detailed description of the church in the introduction, in order to contextualise the following chapters, I shall just give a brief recap on the situation of St Mary's. The church is located in an urban area of North West London at a busy road intersection. The congregation reflects some of the diversity of the local population and the church shares its local area with a variety of other places of worship. The black Madonna sits on a platform on the right hand side of the church near the chancel, looking out at the congregation.

When reviewing the existing literature, I suggested that a lack of historical record made it difficult to ascertain the origins of many black Madonna shrines. The gap left by this paucity of information has then been filled with the sometimes highly speculative theories of the likes of Ean Begg and Picknett and Prince. The shrine at St Mary's and the black Madonna residing there occupies an interesting position as it both challenges and conforms to these origin stories attached to other black Madonnas. On the one hand, as the work of historians discussed in this chapter show, the church of St Mary's is reasonably well documented. As mentioned in the introduction to my research, the current statue is a recent one and in a later chapter I will discuss the interview I conducted with the artist. On the other hand, and more in keeping with the stories attached to other black Madonnas, there is some debate over the existence of the original, pre-Reformation black Madonna at St Mary's.

I would suggest that this debate provides a platform from which one can explore questions about the creation and uses of the history of a particular place or event. Such debates also reinforce the points raised by Wendy Doniger<sup>242</sup> and highlighted in the methodological section of my research; namely, that narratives may have elements of ambiguity, and that they are multi-vocal. This chapter therefore provides a discussion of these issues as they relate to St Mary's on the links between history, place and narrative at the church.

Accounts of the church's history are given in local history books and pamphlets, guide books to shrines and by the church itself via the website. Whilst conducting fieldwork at the church, particular connections relating to the church's history and its importance to the congregation began to emerge. There were clear relationships between narratives of the church's history and with its shrine as a special space. This chapter therefore examines the relationships which members of the congregation have with history and place at St Mary's. As Gary Waller argues, shrines produce narratives 'with significant cultural meanings: the history of any community contains multiple, contradictory stories'. Such stories are ones of 'loss, abandonment and renewal.'<sup>243</sup> The loss and abandonment that Waller speaks of relates to the destruction of Marian shrines during the Reformation and this is especially pertinent to the story of St Mary's. The stories relating to the destruction of the original shrine and its subsequent renewal provide a rich context in which worship currently takes place.

In order to explore this history, the chapter draws on range of different sources, starting with a description of the shrine from Ean Begg's *The Cult of the Black Virgin*.<sup>244</sup> The

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<sup>242</sup> Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*.

<sup>243</sup> Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture*. p.8.

<sup>244</sup> Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*.

chapter then examines the historical narratives presented by the church itself and then moves on to those written from a local history perspective. Some of the local history sources concentrate just on the story of St Mary's. Others are broader in scope and include information about the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady of Willesden, situated near to St Mary's. Information throughout the chapter has also been gathered from more general books on shrines to Virgin Mary in the United Kingdom and includes Willesden (both Roman Catholic and Anglican churches) as an example of these.

Finally, the chapter considers the significance which members of the congregation attach to the history of their church. This includes the history of the church as understood and re-told by individual members of the congregation; the continuity of worship over the centuries; and the notion that this history has contributed to the specialness of St Mary's as a sacred place. Here the information is drawn from interviews conducted with members of the congregation during the course of my fieldwork at the church.

### **'For over a thousand years a holy place'<sup>245</sup> – Antiquity and Authenticity**

This section looks at the narratives that establish the antiquity of the shrine at St Mary's, beginning with information supplied by Ean Begg and then moving on to the information supplied by the church itself. The inclusion of Begg here is important as it establishes a link between the more speculative literature as discussed earlier in this research and what appears, at first, to be the more straightforward account of St Mary's provided by the church itself. The information provided by the church's website is described here as it shows how the church presents its own history, to both the congregation and to the public

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<sup>245</sup> Words taken from a sermon preached on the church's 2010 Dedication Festival. See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Archive.html> Accessed 09/01/2012.



at large. It demonstrates how the church produces its own narratives, and what it considers important to share.

As discussed in the literature review, Begg's approach to the study of black Madonnas comes from a Jungian psychoanalytic perspective. His interest primarily lies in the symbolic meanings of the black Madonna. In order to demonstrate the ubiquity of these symbols, he includes a gazetteer of black Madonnas across the world which includes an entry on the black Madonna of Willesden. On the origins of the shrine he writes:

It had probably been there since the foundation of this mother church of Willesden ('hill of spring') in 938 and may have perpetuated the cult of the goddess Brigantia, whose name lives on in the River Brent, of which the spring that flows under the high altar of the church forms a tributary.<sup>246</sup>

Here, Begg situates St Mary's within the broader narratives of the pre-Christian origins of black Madonnas. As argued in the preceding chapter, the desire amongst some sections of the existing research to emphasize the pre-Christian roots of, and by extension the mysteriousness of the black Madonna, is questionable. To reiterate the point made previously by Hutton among others<sup>247</sup>, the problem with this approach is not necessarily the truth, or otherwise of such claims. Rather, it is misplaced to suggest that there is continuity of meaning between a black Madonna site that had previously been a non-Christian one. This may or may not have any bearing on the way the site is used and understood *now*. Meanings and interpretation may be subject to change and development.

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<sup>246</sup> Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin, p.267.

<sup>247</sup> Hutton, The Pagan Religions of the British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy.

In the case of St Mary's, as I demonstrate further on in this chapter, although the origins of the shrine and its history were important to the current congregation, this was very much as a Christian site, not a pre-Christian one. The specific connection of a shrine on the site of St Mary's with any previous, pre-Christian worship is not mentioned in the other historical sources I examine in this chapter. It is therefore unfortunate that Begg does not provide any details of his sources as to these possible connections.

Interestingly, when we then look at the history of the shrine as presented by the church itself, a similar story of antiquity emerges. The church website describes how the shrine's beginnings are 'shrouded in the mists of antiquity'<sup>248</sup> and acknowledges the pre-Christian foundations of a now Christian shrine, placing the church in Britain's Anglo-Saxon past:

Christianity did nothing to change the basic economics and demography of Saxon England and never dispelled belief in "magic" as practised by the Druids; it could even lend it new dimensions. Magical wells became Christian shrines and old oaths were taken on holy relics or the Bible, and by the end of the 8th century 20 English churches are known to have been dedicated to Mary.

Willesden derives from "Wilsdon" or "Wellesden", possibly meaning a spring or well at the foot of a hill, and it is likely that in Anglo-Saxon times there was a wooden church on or near the site of the present church. The London Diocese Book gives the date of the foundation of the Parish Church of St Mary as 938 during the reign of King Athelstan, who was a zealous collector of relics giving lavish gifts to churches.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Virgin5.html>. Accessed 10/12/2011.

<sup>249</sup> See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Virgin5.html>. Accessed 10/12/2011.

Whilst this account does not link the black Madonna with ancient pre-Christian beliefs as in Begg's version, elements of antiquity remain. As mentioned previously, Scheer has argued that antiquity as a marker of authenticity has been important in understanding the significance of black Madonnas.<sup>250</sup> Similarly, I would suggest, the emphasis on the ancient beginnings of the shrine at St Mary's are a means by which the shrine might claim its own authenticity. In establishing the history and legitimacy of St Mary's, the Marian tradition is as important as the one associated with Athelstan. Whilst, as the next section of this chapter will show, there is some doubt over the evidence for the shrine's foundation in the Anglo-Saxon era, this assertion is not necessarily so far-fetched. Miri Rubin has pointed out that the Anglo-Saxon British isles was characterised by a strong Marian devotion, with many examples of Marian art and poetry from this era.<sup>251</sup>

The story of Athelstan is also included in *Potty Pilgrims of Willesden*<sup>252</sup>, a document which was written to explain the history of St Mary's to children. Here Athelstan is cast in the role of hero – 'a gallant young man'; 'Not only was he courageous in battle, but he was also courageous in faith. A true man of God who wore his Christianity on his sleeve.'<sup>253</sup> Athelstan is depicted as almost Arthurian in his combination of battle skills and religious faith.

In his work on the shrine and pilgrimage of Walsingham, Simon Coleman suggests the founding of that shrine also said to have been in Anglo-Saxon times<sup>254</sup> has a symbolic significance. By locating the founding of the shrine in this era, Coleman suggests that it

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<sup>250</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries." p.15.

<sup>251</sup> Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2009). pp.105-112.

<sup>252</sup> A copy of this was given to me by a member of the congregation. The person who gave this to me thought it had been written and illustrated by a previous curate and his wife. No author or date of creation is given in the document.

<sup>253</sup> *Potty Pilgrims of Willesden*. p.1.

<sup>254</sup> For a detailed examination of the cultural importance of Walsingham's foundations see Gary Waller, *Walsingham and the English Imagination* (Burlington and Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011).

is possible to interpret these stories as making ‘a point about nationality: origins are sought in the Anglo-Saxon period, not the era of foreign, Norman rule.’<sup>255</sup> Walsingham was ‘England’s Nazareth’ and Coleman points out, pilgrims have connected it to the idea of England as ‘Our Lady’s Dowry’<sup>256</sup> and Walsingham itself has become associated with a particular type of Englishness, which equates the ‘rural with historical.’<sup>257</sup> At St Mary’s, such associations were not quite as clear. I would argue the emphasis on the Anglo-Saxon origins of St Mary’s is more to do with establishing the shrine’s historical authenticity. Any sense of “Englishness” and religion (in the case of St Mary’s, Anglicanism) did not specifically emerge in any conversations I had with members of the congregation.<sup>258</sup> However, there are narratives at play at St Mary’s in terms of the rural and the historical, and I examine these later in this chapter when discussing how the congregation view their church’s history. There are however aspects of the church that do draw on ideas of national and religious identity and I return to them in chapter six.

Once the church at Willesden had been established by Athelstan, according to the church’s account of its history, it is unclear when the black Madonna first arrived. The oldest parts of the current building have been dated to around 1315 C.E. although the font is thought to be much older, dating back to 1150 C.E.<sup>259</sup> The church website suggests the shrine became a popular pilgrimage destination, with the black Madonna and the holy well as the main focal points for pilgrims:

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<sup>255</sup> Simon Coleman, "Pilgrimage To "England's Nazareth": Landscapes of Myth and Memory at Walsingham," *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, eds. Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).p.55.

<sup>256</sup> Coleman, "Pilgrimage To "England's Nazareth": Landscapes of Myth and Memory at Walsingham." p.55. For an examination of the possible origins and symbolism of this idea see Boss, *Mary*. pp.118-129.

<sup>257</sup> Coleman, "Pilgrimage To "England's Nazareth": Landscapes of Myth and Memory at Walsingham." p.52.

<sup>258</sup> People did speak more widely of previous personal experiences and identity connected to their faith and I explore those in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>259</sup> See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Tour5.html> Accessed 10/12/2011.

From the earliest times the church had a patronal statue of St Mary, and throughout the Middle Ages Willesden was one of the best known villages in the vicinity of London, the reason being that St Mary's church possessed the famous shrine of Our Lady of Willesden - "The Black Virgin of Willesden" - to which miraculous powers were ascribed.<sup>260</sup>

The church website describes how during the Black Death the shrine was much in demand for healing. It claims that by 1475 the shrine was amazingly popular, perhaps as a result of healings. However, the website points out the shrine also had its critics. A certain Father Donald, 'dour Scottish friar', preaching from St Paul's cross in 1350, gave a warning to the men of London:

*Ye men of London, gangen yourselves with your wives to Wilsdon  
in the devil's name or else keep them at home with you in sorrow.*<sup>261</sup>

According to the church website, the shrine was destroyed during the Reformation in 1538 and it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Virgin Mary returned to St Mary's. This return occurred against the backdrop of a wider Anglican revival of Marian devotion with, as Paul Williams describes, its 'stained glass, banners, images and shrines.'<sup>262</sup> In 1911 the Reverend James Dixon, described by *Potty Pilgrims* as an 'austere, confident and holy man', had a new statue erected:

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<sup>260</sup> See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Virgin5.html> Accessed 10/12/2011.

<sup>261</sup> This description of Father Donald as it appears on the website may well be taken from H.M. Gillett, *Shrines of Our Lady in England and Wales* (London: Samuel Walker Ltd, 1957). p.374. Gillett uses the same description. This story is also found in Harold Egan, ed., *The Parish Church of St Mary, Willesden: A Short History and Guide* (Gloucester: British Publishing, 1970). p.15.

<sup>262</sup> See Paul Williams, "The Virgin Mary in Anglican Tradition," *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London and New York: Continuum, 2007). P.334. Williams lists numerous Marian shrines revived at this time including Willesden.

Furthermore, it was Vicar Dixon who rediscovered formally that which had never left our Church Family, the special place of Mary in our lives and in our worship. He believed that once again, we must say thank you to her for the special place that she has for Willesden in her heart. So he commissioned a new statue of our Mother, painted in gold. She was given pride of place in the Chancel, and all who received communion would had [sic] to walk past her, to say thank you and ask her for her prayers.<sup>263</sup>

As with Athelstan before him, the Reverend Dixon is portrayed as another Christian hero. The assumption in *Potty Pilgrims* is that everyone at St Mary's would be happy for Marian worship at the church to be revived. This emphasis on Mary is interesting in light of the fact that St Mary's is an Anglican church. This is certainly an issue that I shall return to in the following chapter when Marian worship and the current black Madonna at St Mary's are examined in more detail. As with language on the current church website, the tone of *Potty Pilgrims* highlights the communitarian aspects of St Mary's. This tone is further reflected in the comments made by the congregation on how they feel about their church which I discuss later in the chapter.

## **Narratives of Local History**

The second section of this chapter focuses on historical narratives as produced by local history guides. They are included in this chapter because they provide another layer, adding to the multivocality of the shrine's history. These narratives are of interest because they have demonstrated some challenge to the narrative provided by the church. There is also some disagreement between the different accounts given below. This further reinforces Doniger's point, discussed previously, that narratives may conflict with

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<sup>263</sup> The Potty Pilgrims of Willesden p.5.

or contradict one another.<sup>264</sup> Despite any differences in opinion, the narratives from local historians may also be seen as another type of ‘official’ account. As with the church’s website, these are narratives designed to inform the wider public about the history of the shrine.

Several local history accounts also place the origins of the shrine in the time of Athelstan. For example, Harold Egan wrote in 1970 that the connection between Athelstan and St Mary’s might be explained as follows:

The current London Diocese Book gives the date of the foundation of the Parish Church of St Mary as 938 A.D. during the reign of King Athelstan c. 925-939.

This is presumably based on the assumption that the foundation of the church was connected with Athelstan’s charter of about that date.<sup>265</sup>

Another more recent account written by Nicholas Schofield expands on this, claiming that in the year 939 C.E., King Athelstan granted:

The ten manors of “Neasden cum Willesden” to “the Apostle St. Paul’s own monastery in the City of London” in thanksgiving for his victory over the Danes at the battle of Brunanburh (937). Though it is likely that this decisive battle was fought somewhere in the northwest or even in Scotland, some writers have claimed that nearby Brondesbury was the actual location. Athelstan is depicted in the present East Window at St Mary’s, offering the church and lands to Christ the King.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Doniger, The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth. p.80.

<sup>265</sup> Egan, ed., The Parish Church of St Mary, Willesden: A Short History and Guide. p.9.

<sup>266</sup> Nicholas Schofield, Our Lady of Willesden: A Brief History of the Shrine and Parish (London: 2002). p.10.

Despite asserting the Anglo-Saxon foundations of the church, as with the church website, information from local history guides are unsure when the shrine became popular. Egan, for example, describes how:

The earliest documentary reference to the church appears much later in an Inquisition made for St Paul's Cathedral in 1181 in which the church of Willesden is recorded as "in the demesne of the canons and renders to them 8 marks a year by the hand of German the clerk and pays in the name of sinodals 13 pence.

A visitation made in 1249 lists the furniture and vessels of the church, which included books, missals, 2 graduals, a psalter, three troperia, and an antiphona; vestments (some of which were stated to be old); a red silk banner and an image of the Virgin Mary in tinsel and two large sculptured images of the Virgin. Another visitation in 1297 records among the many items listed that "a tabernacle had been erected over each of the statues, one of which had an ascending angel on each side".<sup>267</sup>

Although this would appear to establish the presence of images of the Virgin Mary, there are no mentions of the precise nature of the images and no mention as to whether they are black. There is also no indication as whether any sort of pilgrimage was established at this time.

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<sup>267</sup> Egan, ed., The Parish Church of St Mary, Willesden: A Short History and Guide. p.9.



In 1988, local historian Ken Valentine wrote a new account of the history of St Mary's to commemorate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the destruction of the shrine. In this account, he produced some interesting new evidence regarding the history of the shrine and challenged some previously established information regarding the church's history. According to Valentine, there was no description of any of the images having been a black Madonna. Although the church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, as Valentine points out, this was not unusual and other churches in the area had the same dedication.<sup>268</sup>

Valentine argued that previous accounts, such as H.M. Gillett's *Shrines of Our Lady in England and Wales*<sup>269</sup>, contained errors. In particular Valentine took issue with the quotation from the so-called 'dour Scottish friar' Father Donald. Valentine argued that the likes of Gillett have mistakenly believed the Father Donald to be a real person, whereas in fact the Father Donald episode was taken from fictitious dialogue regarding heresy written by Thomas More in 1528. Valentine contends that this misunderstanding over the character of Father Donald is further compounded by another author, Simeon Potter, who wrote 1350 instead of 1530 and placed the Father Donald episode after the Black Death. These mistakes were then been repeated by subsequent authors.<sup>270</sup>

These discoveries by Valentine are important because they reveal the misconceptions and errors that have beset previous investigations. I would argue that such revelations reveal once again the difficulties when dealing with gaps in the history of a black Madonna shrine. Whilst perhaps not quite the same as the more speculative assertions of the likes of Begg, such errors demonstrate a real desire to fill those gaps with what are perceived

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<sup>268</sup> Kenneth J. Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence (London: 2nd Edition 2005). p.4.

<sup>269</sup> Gillett, Shrines of Our Lady in England and Wales.

<sup>270</sup> See Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.12.

to be the historical ‘facts’ and establish a historical pedigree for the shrine and its pilgrimage.

For Valentine at least, there was no evidence for the shrine’s popularity before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. To further support his theory, he describes how ‘William Helperby, vicar of Willesden, was pleading poverty to the Pope as late as July 1474’. Helperby requested ‘to be allowed to live away from his vicarage on account of his age and the slenderness of the fruits of the living. Helperby obtained permission from Rome to live away from his vicarage while continuing to enjoy the “lesser tithes” belonging to it’. Valentine suggests that it is possible that the idea of a pilgrimage was introduced in order to provide Willesden with more income.<sup>271</sup> However, Schofield challenges this explanation. Whilst acknowledging Valentine’s ‘pioneering work’ in his ‘critique of the traditional story’, Schofield is more sceptical of Valentine’s theory of why a pilgrimage did begin at Willesden and argues that this theory ‘is as speculative as any other’.<sup>272</sup>

However, both Valentine and Schofield agree that although the reasons are unclear, at some time after 1474, the shrine and pilgrimage did indeed become popular. Valentine found that Queen Elizabeth, wife of Henry VII, made donations to various shrines including Willesden. One such donation was made whilst the Queen was in the Tower of London awaiting the birth of her seventh child. In 1502, ‘Her accounts record that in December 6s 8d was given to a monk for bringing her an “Our Lady” girdle which expectant women frequently wore (Our Lady’s bands) hoping that this would ensure them a safe delivery’.<sup>273</sup> She and the baby died not long after the birth in early February

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<sup>271</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.5.

<sup>272</sup> Schofield, Our Lady of Willesden: A Brief History of the Shrine and Parish. p.16.

<sup>273</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.7.

1503 but the details of the donation were recorded some time afterward on the 26<sup>th</sup> Feb.<sup>274</sup>

To further demonstrate the popularity of the shrine, Schofield describes how in 1517, ‘William Litchfield, the Vicar of Willesden, was buried at the feet of Our Lady, according to his request’ and that he also gave the church gold cloth, black velvet and gilt chalice. John Beld, a dyer, also in 1517, ‘left money in his will for the repairing of “the highway from Kilburn to Our Lady of Willesden” – a route he must have taken on his pilgrimages to the shrine.’<sup>275</sup>

Gillett describes a popular tradition whereby the Virgin Mary ‘appeared in an oak tree in the churchyard to a client and that a well began to flow.’<sup>276</sup> It was therefore this miraculous appearance that helped facilitate the pilgrimage. Once again, how and when this story came about is not known, so the specific reasons for the increased popularity of Willesden during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries cannot be ascertained. However, as Waller points out, there was:

an explosion of Marian devotion in the Middle Ages and a growth in the number of images of the Virgin Mary in local parish churches, like the church of St Mary’s in Willesden. This was Marian devotion on a local as well as a national level. With their origins in the stories generated by hundreds of years of popular religion rather than orthodox theology, the multiple Madonnas of medieval England played different roles in various localities. This was the ‘lived religion’

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<sup>274</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.7-8.

<sup>275</sup> Schofield, Our Lady of Willesden: A Brief History of the Shrine and Parish. p.17.

<sup>276</sup> Gillett, Shrines of Our Lady in England and Wales. p.372.

of medieval England, with ‘local Madonnas’ who ‘stayed close to the everyday experiences of local Christians.’<sup>277</sup>

The above examples of devotion help to locate a local shrine such as Willesden in the Europe-wide cult of the Virgin Mary established at this time. Marian pilgrimage and devotion was a potent religious force:

A powerful Madonna, her relics, and the highly charged Mariocentric atmosphere of a pilgrimage to a place such as Walsingham or Ipswich did not merely memorialize the past; each of the “images” burnt in 1538 in some sense was the Virgin, literally an embodiment of pilgrims’ sense of the divine. Holiness was also directly apprehended in specific sensory details that pilgrims encountered both at and en route to the shrine – sights, sounds, tastes, sensations, feelings stimulated by bells, lights, prayer, music, water, incense, relics, processions, rituals, souvenirs, and badges – all of which helped make the Virgin present to the pilgrims and spilt over into the supposedly non-sacred world around. A pilgrimage, whether to a nationally famous shrine such as Walsingham or a local shrine such as Woolpit or Willesden, proclaimed the possibility of personal intimacy with the Virgin, not merely as a distant historical figure but there, in the details of a particular place.<sup>278</sup>

As powerful as devotion was to the Virgin, by the early 16<sup>th</sup> century at least, there was a growing opposition to this type of worship. In 1509, the Lollard Elizabeth Sampson, wife

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<sup>277</sup> Waller, The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture. p.32.

<sup>278</sup> Waller, The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture. p.83.

of John Sampson, of Alderbury in the City of London allegedly said that the statue of Our Lady of Willesden was a:

'brent ars elf' on a 'brent ars stock' and 'yf she myght have holpen men and women which go to hyre of pilgremage she wolde not have suffered hyr tayle to have byn brent. And better it wer for peple to geff their almy at home to pore people than to go of pilgremege'.<sup>279</sup>

According to Valentine, 'brent' meant 'burnt', and concluded this meant 'evidently the image had its posterior scorched'.<sup>280</sup> Schofield suggests this description of the statue being burnt supports the idea of a black Madonna at Willesden.<sup>281</sup> Sampson's anger was also aimed at other Marian shrines. Waller describes how: 'For good measure, the outspoken Lollard called Our Lady of Crome, near Greenwich, "but a puppet"'.<sup>282</sup> Sampson herself was evidently charged with 'heretical depravity' and compelled to do penance for her offence.<sup>283</sup>

According to Waller, reformers 'had it in for Our Lady of Willesden: for one she was a "stewed whore", for another, the Virgin was "the chefe lady mastres" of "whoredom and letcherousness."'<sup>284</sup> The Reformation finally put an end to the shrine at St Mary's, along with others including Walsingham, Ipswich and Worcester. Whilst the exact fate of Our

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<sup>279</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.9.

<sup>280</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.9.

<sup>281</sup> Schofield, Our Lady of Willesden: A Brief History of the Shrine and Parish. p.20.

<sup>282</sup> Waller, The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture. p.97.

<sup>283</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.9.

<sup>284</sup> Waller, The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture. Here Waller quotes from Malcolm Jones, The Secret Middle Ages, Westport: Praeger, 2002. pp.32-33.

Lady of Willesden is unknown, Valentine suspects it was destroyed with other shrine images on Cromwell's bonfire at Chelsea in September 1538.<sup>285</sup>

But the story of the black Madonna of Willesden did not end there. A copy of a letter from 1535 appeared in The Kensington and Bayswater Chronicle on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1877. In the 1535 letter, one Richard Mores, sent by Thomas Cromwell to remove the statue for it to be destroyed, described the image as:

*made of woode in color like ebon of ancient workmanschip onli save the upper part is thoroughly playted over with silver.*<sup>286</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting suggestion of Valentine's is the possibility that this description of the image of the Virgin at Willesden as a black Madonna is a hoax.

Valentine researched for many years in order to find some evidence to authenticate the information given in the letter, but was never able to corroborate it. The character of Richard Mores could not be traced, and the monastery where it was claimed he came from was found to be a women's religious house abolished before the Norman Conquest. What Valentine saw as further mistakes and anomalies in the grammar and language of the letter led him to conclude that the letter was probably a fabrication concocted 'by an enthusiastic antiquarian'.<sup>287</sup> The local history society went through all Valentine's papers after his death and could not find any further evidence to authenticate the letter.<sup>288</sup>

Schofield's more recent account of the shrine accepts Valentine's conclusions and the

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<sup>285</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.15.

<sup>286</sup> The story is related in Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.18 and Schofield, Our Lady of Willesden: A Brief History of the Shrine and Parish. p.20.

<sup>287</sup> Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. p.19.

<sup>288</sup> See Valentine, Our Lady of Willesden: An Account of the Mediaeval Shrine Based on Much New Evidence. pp.18-20. The information regarding Valentine's notebooks comes from an interview I conducted with a representative of the local history society, December 2009.

church website acknowledges that 'Unfortunately this letter has been shown to be a late Victorian fabrication', but is still prepared to accept 'it probably gives an accurate description of the image.'<sup>289</sup>

Valentine, Schofield, and the church website do not comment on why this document may have been faked in the first place. It is just left there for the reader to either accept or not. It may well be that Valentine was mistaken. Although he did not find evidence to support the letter's claims, this does not necessarily mean it did not exist; after all, if so much was destroyed in the Reformation, why not the evidence that would support the authenticity of the claims made by the letter? Why would anyone want to invent a black Madonna if one did not exist previously? Valentine simply attributes it to enthusiasm. We can only speculate, but perhaps the mystery takes us back once again to Scheer's point that blackness is a marker for age and therefore authenticity when it comes to images of the Virgin Mary.

One parallel that can be drawn between the above story and the existing literature is the example of Saint Sara. As demonstrated in chapter one, the pilgrimage to the black Saint Sara in France, a popular figure amongst the more interpretative, psychoanalytic approaches to black Madonnas, was largely invented by a local aristocrat to promote the region's culture and traditions and encourage tourism.<sup>290</sup> At the risk of speculating too far, could it be that rather than attempting to downplay the significance of St Mary's, the speculation over a pre-Reformation black Madonna at Willesden is an attempt to provide a sense of exoticism and interest by a Victorian antiquarian that a plain old white Madonna just would not?

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<sup>289</sup> See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Virgin5-2.html>. Accessed 10/12/2011.

<sup>290</sup> See for example Wiley, "Romani Performance and Heritage Tourism: The Pilgrimage of the Gypsies at Les Saintes-Maries-De-La-Mer."

There is a contrast here between how the official history of the church as written on the website, which promotes the story of the black Madonna, with the portrayal of the official attitudes to the black Madonna in previous research. For example, in chapter three, I pointed out how Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum claimed that the Catholic Church has whitened black Madonnas in order to downplay their significance.<sup>291</sup>

In yet another development in the narratives of Our Lady of Willesden, stories circulate that the statue was actually rescued and escaped the bonfires of 1538, although it is unclear how or when these stories began. The story of Our Lady of Willesden's survival would appear to mirror that of Our Lady of Grace in Ipswich. This statue was also thought destroyed on the bonfires. It is believed she is now found in Nettuno in Italy in a shrine shared with the 20<sup>th</sup> century martyr Maria Goretti. Pilgrimages have taken place between Ipswich and Nettuno and a new shrine to Our Lady of Grace was opened in 2002 at St Mary-at-the-Elms, Ipswich.<sup>292</sup> In an attempt to account for such stories, Waller suggests:

the number and identity of the victims have been sufficient over the centuries to generate wish-fulfillment fantasies on behalf of some of the "images" that were destroyed, especially those of Our Lady of Ipswich and Our Lady of Walsingham. There are nostalgic sentiments, frequently expressed on guided tours, in booklets, websites, and even in relatively sober histories, that somehow they were mysteriously saved from the fire and smuggled away to places of

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<sup>291</sup> See for example Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy*.

<sup>292</sup> For more details on this story see Anne Vail, *Shrines of Our Lady in England* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004), pp.103-111 and [http://www.stmaryattheelms.org.uk/st\\_mary\\_at\\_the\\_elms/Shrine.html](http://www.stmaryattheelms.org.uk/st_mary_at_the_elms/Shrine.html) Accessed 30/01/2012.



safety, thereby to continue their work of (depending on one's viewpoint) miracle or idolatry.<sup>293</sup>

The stories of loss and abandonment of the Virgin identified by Waller at the beginning of this chapter are powerful indeed; so powerful that it is as if the gap left by this loss needs to be filled with new stories of rediscovery and restoration. One member of the congregation made a telling comment about the black Madonna of Willesden. He suggested that 'the statue had a life of its own apparently',<sup>294</sup> a life that would appear to take her beyond the boundaries of a parish church in North London. I would argue that this story reinforces my earlier suggestion of the need to fill gaps in the narratives of black Madonnas. In the case of the black Madonna of Willesden, the possible rediscovery of the statue is the literal filling of such a gap.

## **Creating History**

Before moving on to explore the relationship between the congregation and their church's history, in this section I reflect more generally on the uses and creation of history in relation to the historical narratives at St Mary's. Jill Dubisch has pointed out that the writing and use of history is not without problems. When thinking about history and how it is written, we need to 'consider the extent to which the dominance of Western European ideas of history, writing and "truth" shape the way local historians and other scholars write'.<sup>295</sup> In this approach, history has been seen as 'a sequence of events arranged in chronological order, cause and effect, linear time'.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Waller, The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture. p.2.

<sup>294</sup> From taped interview, November, 2009.

<sup>295</sup> Dubisch, In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine. p.148.

<sup>296</sup> Dubisch, In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine. p.154.

Whilst conducting her research on the shrine of the Church of the Madonna of the Annunciation on the Aegean island of Tinos, when questioned by colleagues and students, Dubisch refused to ‘offer an opinion about the truth or falsity of the accounts: determining their truth or falsity was not my interest or my intent.’<sup>297</sup> Dubisch uses the Greek word *istoria*, which is a more ambiguous term, meaning both “story” and “history”, suggesting that we can also view history as ‘a cultural construct’, ‘at odds with a positivist view of history that sees past events as having “really” happened and the task of the historian (or other scholar) as the empirical one of “discovering” them.’<sup>298</sup>

The question of whether events “really happened” is pertinent to examining stories and histories at St Mary’s. As this chapter has shown, particular aspects of the church’s history have been questioned by local historians. These narratives sometimes remain at odds with the stories related by the church itself and, as the following section will show, the congregation. The aim of this chapter has not been to either prove or disprove the accounts given about the history of the church and the black Madonna. What is of interest here are the ways in which these multiple narratives of St Mary’s Church - the stories of the church’s foundation, the statue of the black Madonna and the holy well - and how peoples re-telling, understanding and use of these narratives are woven together, creating what Dubisch describes as a multivocal or polyphonic account of a shrine.<sup>299</sup> As Marion Bowman argues: ‘We need to know what stories are significant, and for whom. We need to know if a myth is “live”, and how is it being used to inform, construct or modify belief in a variety of contexts’.<sup>300</sup> In the final section of this chapter I suggest there are relationships, between past and present, between the physical environment and the religious practices that take place there.

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<sup>297</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, p.140.

<sup>298</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, p.138.

<sup>299</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, p.154.

<sup>300</sup> Marion Bowman, "Taking Stories Seriously: Vernacular Religion, Contemporary Spirituality and the Myth of Jesus in Glastonbury," *Temenos* 39-40 (2003). p.140.

## **‘I feel the presence of those souls around me’ – Congregational Narratives**

Robert Orsi has argued that stories of Marian apparitions, shrines and pilgrimages, are problematic for scholars because they challenge the authority, boundaries and categories that modern historiography has tried to impose upon them:

religious experience is remade in conformity with modern liberal notions of what “religion” is: autonomous, a distinct domain apart from other areas of life, private, in conformity with the causal laws of nature, reasonable, interior – all the things that Marian apparitions and what follows from them are not.<sup>301</sup>

Instead, Orsi encourages scholars to see religion as a web or network of relationships that humans create between themselves and with the sacred. In the final section of this chapter, I move onto explore some of those relationships – in this instance, the relationship individuals at St Mary’s have with their church’s history. This is not just the ‘knowing’ of history in a factual sense, as demonstrated by the work of local historians. Rather, it is an exploration of the ways in which history interrelates with experiences of the sacred in this place.

Athelstan’s story was significant for members of the congregation and their understanding of the church’s history. The association of the foundation of St Mary’s with a religious order already existing on the site provides the foundation with an added legitimacy for this interviewee:

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<sup>301</sup> Robert A. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005). p.219.

What I've been told through successive vicars as well, is that the king wouldn't have gone into a group that was non-religious – or even if they were religious – in the woods, and said, “well I'll give you a bag of gold and, you know, build a church”. It had to be, well, whether you call it a religious sect or an early type of monastery, you know. It was the chanting that they were doing drew him into the, well, as he came past and as I say, when he won the battle; and that's why the stained glass window shows Athelstan with his name on the sword and the bag of gold under his left heel.<sup>302</sup>

Another interviewee felt that St Mary's needed to be seen in a wider historical context of Mary's popularity. Therefore, the religious order Athelstan encountered may have already have had their own shrine to the Virgin Mary:

In context, let's put it this way – the first and the biggest parish anywhere around here from medieval times was St Mary's. First, before any other church existed. So in itself it has the huge weight of historical evidence in favour of its existence and that it is a church to St Mary. I suspect that the Mendicants who were there at the time all around the world had already got Mary because of the context of her early life and the early church something in their minds, and I suspect that was how it became St Mary's; but that is only a suspicion.<sup>303</sup>

The challenge that scholarly examination might present to the views of worshippers trying to understand the history of their church was commented upon by interviewees. One member of the congregation was also involved in the local history society. He explained that he had read about the research conducted by Valentine as mentioned

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<sup>302</sup> From taped interview, July 2009.

<sup>303</sup> From taped interview, November, 2009.

above. On the alleged existence of a black Madonna at Willesden he commented that while ‘There’s not a lot to support why they (the black Madonnas) were there and what the first one was,’<sup>304</sup> he was satisfied that ‘there almost certainly was a statue of a black virgin in the times around - I think about Henry VIII’s.’<sup>305</sup> He acknowledged his belief in the existence of the original black Madonna challenged the work of historians:

then it was, I believe, burnt – but all of this [is] not totally documented and any historian would say if it’s not fully documented, it’s not wholly supported; and you can only treat it as conjecture unless you can prove the burden of proof beyond any reasonable doubt.<sup>306</sup>

Another interviewee who had looked in some detail at local historians’ accounts of the shrine acknowledged that he agreed to an extent with their findings but was nevertheless convinced that there was once a black Madonna at St Mary’s:

Now the visitation was in 1249. They actually say here that – well, I’ll just quote this – it says: ‘outside of Willesden the chief fame of its old church was its image of the Virgin Mary, the Black Virgin of Willesden’. So it must have been known as the black virgin then you see, but there again it says ‘the black virgin of Willesden’. That’s why I say the church was St Mary the Virgin and that is, if you go into the archives or anything to do with the architects, this church is ‘St Mary the Virgin’ but it’s only dropped the title or shortened it to St Mary’s, Willesden over the years. But they say to an image of the Virgin in tinsel, two large sculptured images of the Virgin are listed amongst the possessions of the church, but as I say one of those was one that was taken to Walsingham; but

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<sup>304</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>305</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>306</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

when it was taken, it says further on in one of the books that it had jewels as well in it.<sup>307</sup>

The evolution of the environment surrounding the church was raised in the course of the fieldwork. Walking down Neasden Lane from the tube station to the church, the traffic is heavy and one has to walk past industrial estates and waste recycling centres which make the walk a gritty and dusty one. Much is made in written histories of the church of its once rural position, contrasting with how it is now. For example, in one guide, Nicholas Schofield writes:

Today Middlesex is a sprawl of multicultural suburbs, linked by bus routes and local train lines to the heart of London. But it was not always so. Until comparatively recently, the greyish streets bustling with noisy traffic were quiet country lanes, lined with hedgerows; the underground stations were the names of sleepy villages and hamlets, nestling in the shadow of London; the long rows of suburban “villas” the site of green fields where cows happily grazed. A journey into Willesden’s past and the story of its Marian shrine thus requires a substantial leap of the imagination.<sup>308</sup>

The once rural aspects of Willesden came up in interview. One interviewee remarked that ‘When my mum was a little girl this used to be fields all round here’ and that ‘she used to go across the fields to school.’<sup>309</sup> This interviewee also emphasised the village-like quality of Willesden during her childhood, more than sixty years ago:

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<sup>307</sup> From taped interview, July 2009.

<sup>308</sup> Schofield, Our Lady of Willesden: A Brief History of the Shrine and Parish. p.7.

<sup>309</sup> From taped interview conducted July 2009.

We had those little turnings, we had little Church Lane here, it was a little tiny lane with little cottages. You walked to the bottom of this path, the vicar's plot, little tiny alleyway Church Lane, it was all lovely little cottages.<sup>310</sup>

The representation of St Mary's as a church in a village, rather than in a city, still resonates within the congregation. One interviewee explained that one of the aspects of the church that appealed to her was its village-like qualities: 'straight away you're meant to feel part of a worshipping community and it was like the village mentality but in London.' This was especially important because:

I suppose really that's what I was looking for as well. Having been brought up in a village and lived in a village where you know everyone and they know you it's really hard to go into somewhere; especially I suppose coming down to London where people don't talk to anyone else, people sit on the tube or the bus and nobody chats whereas at home you sit on the bus and the person next to you, even at the bus stop starts talking straight away and you actually start to miss that communication with people so I suppose yes, it was actually being in a village but in the middle of London.<sup>311</sup>

Whilst the re-telling of the past at St Mary's serves to authenticate the shrine, the church is well aware of its place in the community in which it now resides. The aims of the church to be relevant are pointed out:

In an area of London that sees high levels of social deprivation and a lack of community life, the Church offers a place of refuge. Our community centre is the

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<sup>310</sup> From taped interview conducted July 2009.

<sup>311</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

altar, and each time we celebrate the Mass, the community gathers around it.

Morning and Evening prayer are offered daily, and as with our whole lives and worship, everyone is invited to take a full part.<sup>312</sup>

Concerns about safety in the local area were raised, particularly by older members of the congregation, some of whom had been victims of street robbery. A local woman, known to some members of the congregation but not actually a member herself, was violently attacked in the street in the middle of the day. Members also expressed worries about younger members of their families, warning them not to venture into certain local areas that were known for violence. The current location of the church provides a contrast with the rural idyll of the church's past. Whilst themes of 'Englishness' as identified by Coleman were not explicit in these interviews, there was a sense that the church still embodied the qualities of an English village church and represented a haven in this busy, sometimes threatening environment.

Despite these concerns about the local area, during my fieldwork at St Mary's, and particularly during interviews, one of the recurring themes was that St Mary's was a particularly special place. For example, one interviewee explained that she:

Walked through the door at St Mary's and straight away knew that this was going to be a church that was good for me. It had a very, very welcoming feeling to it even just walking through the door. I looked at the service book and the service book was there and it was my type of service. I sat down and straight away was enveloped by these people saying 'how are you?' It was a real, proper welcome, a real church welcome.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Building5.html> Accessed 10/12/2011.

<sup>313</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.



This specialness was in some way related to the history of the church. Using the word history suggests that something is gone, passed by, but history in the sense that people in the interviews used it represented something much vital. Again this interviewee explained:

you can feel the centuries of prayer that have gone on in there. The minute you walk through the door you just feel it's a special place, you know it's a special place. When you walk through there you think of all the countless people before you who've been through there and said a prayer or sat down and just said nothing at all but the reason people feel they can come and sit down, is the fact it is a welcoming atmosphere. There is definitely something about that church.<sup>314</sup>

There was an understanding that the history of St Mary's was part of a wider history of Christian faith in Britain, with all the upheavals of events such as the Reformation and the English Civil War. St Mary's was an example where the local had connected with events on a national scale. For this person, what was interesting was the lives and experiences of the people who had been involved in the church in its past. How their lives had been affected by national, historical events that were beyond their control but of which they were still very much a part of:

No matter what problems we're having now that church has seen them and come through them. We've got the bullet holes in the door you know<sup>315</sup>, you've got the Reformation. What I find in there absolutely fascinating is if you look at the High Altar you look at the tablet at the left-hand side of the High Altar, it's a JP who

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<sup>314</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>315</sup> The bullets holes mentioned came are said to date from the English Civil War.

lived through the reigns of Edward, Mary, Elizabeth and died in James; how somebody could live through those I find absolutely fascinating. And how someone could live through all that and suppose could be said to be a turncoat in many respects although he must've had some sort of diplomacy to actually get through the whole thing – kept his nose down or something.<sup>316</sup>

There was also recognition that the church needed the support of the congregation to help it through times when there were problems. Current worshippers had a commitment to those who would worship there in the future:

But the church is the same and the church has got through, you know - when we had this problem with the boiler, you sort of know that things will get themselves well and the fact you can't not do something because the church has got to continue for the next generation to come, so you've got to do your bit to maintain it for the next generation of people who are yet to come.<sup>317</sup>

Despite all of those disruptions and social unrest, a sense of the sacred and the practice of faith had continued in this place. Such continuity was something therefore to be valued:

And we've been prayed in for over a thousand years so the sense of that, Father was once talking about that in one of his sermons and he was talking about the font – which we know dates back to Norman times – and he was talking about the things that font has seen, not that the font has been about looking you understand, but I mean it was there throughout the plague, through the fire of London, through the Reformation, you know, the number of baptisms that have been held

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<sup>316</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>317</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

there, the numbers of weddings and funerals and you know, you just think when you've got that kind of history, and you know I mean I just think to myself God obviously knew what he was doing when he became man for us; but you think 2000 years later, we're dressing differently, we're speaking differently, women have a much more pro-active role.<sup>318</sup>

Others remarked on the associations they had made between sacred presence, the actual physical surroundings of the church and the church's past:

I mean one thing you can say is obviously buildings have their own effect on people and for some people buildings affect you more than others. For me I feel that a building has a sense of its own spirit and is imbued with that spirit. Now for me that means I can picture and feel and almost sense one might say all the souls who have been there from before going back to the foundations in 938 albeit they weren't in the building there now.<sup>319</sup>

The same interviewee spoke about the history of the church as a living thing: 'To me the history of St Mary's is alive, it's vibrant and alive because it represents everything about a thousand and seventy odd years of continuous worship and life.'<sup>320</sup> What is important for this individual is how the lives of people make this history. This was a continual process and rooted in this person's religious experiences:

So social history to me in terms of the church as well is relevant so I'd like to just bring that up for you quickly: social history to me is the context of everybody you

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<sup>318</sup> From taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>319</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>320</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

meet and in the case of the religious side of things its every pilgrim you meet,  
because we're all pilgrims on the path to our future life whatever that might be.<sup>321</sup>

He acknowledged that not everyone would experience religion in this way, or even have any kind of religious experience at all: 'I have a very healthy respect for people who have alternate views to me and I will accept that they are very, very strong in their own views and I will not try and sway them.' But he did feel it might be possible to encourage others to have these experiences and that as a Christian, he could provide an example on how to do this. But this was not simply a matter of following scripture. People and their actions, the ways in which a religious life could be led, were just as important in setting such examples:

all I see is, that by example there are some people who will be swayed by example and by the life you lead and that is something I have learnt from my gleanings from the Bible and from people. People to me are real, they're relevant. They make life so vibrant and alive, and every day is a joy because there's somebody new to talk to – a phone, a face, whatever it may be. So that's what I consider social history to be.<sup>322</sup>

Both Orsi and McGuire contend that to consider religion as 'lived' is to take into account that religion is both embodied and practiced. Orsi describes what he calls the 'corporalization of the sacred':

the practice of rendering the invisible visible by constituting this as an experience in a body – in one's own body or in somebody else's body – so that the

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<sup>321</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>322</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of presence for oneself and for others.<sup>323</sup>

McGuire likewise argues that ‘Bodies matter very much, both in the individual’s spiritual life and in the development of a community – a community of memory.’<sup>324</sup> McGuire’s description of ‘a community of memory’ is, I would argue, particularly apposite for the situation at St Mary’s. I would suggest that the quotes from the interviewees shown here demonstrate these links between religion, practice, the body and memory. For both the interviewees speaking, the interaction between people was central to their experiences. From the welcome when someone first walked into the church, to setting a religious example, it was the bodily presence of others that facilitated religious experience. These experiences are not only enhanced by the history, or using McGuire’s description, the community of memory, but in turn contributed to this memory.

The continuation of religious practice contributed to people’s sense of the sacred at St Mary’s. The understanding that their church had been there for at least one thousand years, that others had been conducting their religious rituals in the same place, was so important. The ‘bearers of presence’ as identified by Orsi extend not just to those who worship at St Mary’s in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also to those bodies that worshipped there in the past:

So I see a continuity of religious faith and history since 938, and I feel the presence of those souls around me while I’m sitting in church. And I’m conscious of their presence in a host of ways I suppose, but also the fact through sheer

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<sup>323</sup> Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them. p.74.

<sup>324</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life. p.100.

excitement there is now a thousand and seventy odd years of continuous prayer and supplication, which I find very valuable and important.<sup>325</sup>

Whilst not everyone was as familiar with a detailed history of the church as the interviewee above, others found themselves learning more as time went on and they attended more activities. In particular the church's pilgrimage day – with its re-invention of a previous tradition – was central in making the past relevant:

I was not aware of the history of the church or whatever; as I say, I started with my children going to the school and from the school they would visit the church, so that's how I gained interest. So I said, let me just go and find out what this church is like, and with the travelling distance to those are two reasons I decided to stay at St Mary's. I wasn't aware of the history at all; over the years gradually I tried to learn more and more history. It has just unfolded mainly when we're doing pilgrimage, know more of the history, it's come alive, like you know.<sup>326</sup>

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned the importance of Jeanette Rodriguez's work on Our Lady of Guadalupe in relation to my own work. In her work on Mexican-American women's relationship with Guadalupe, Rodriguez found that her interviewees did not place much importance on the story of the shrine's foundation. This is in contrast to my findings at St Mary's. What these differing results demonstrate is the importance of examining black Madonna shrines on an individual basis, something that I would argue is central to my research at St Mary's.

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<sup>325</sup> From taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>326</sup> From taped interview, July 2010.

Earlier, there was the quote from Bowman, arguing how we needed to find out what stories were important. The last comment from the interviewee above – that history has come alive – sums up just how important the stories and histories of St Mary's are for members of the congregation. To answer Bowman's other questions posed at the beginning of the chapter, the stories, or myths as she calls them, of the shrine's foundation and destruction are still 'live'. These stories help worshippers to connect with one another and to the church as a whole.

I propose that there is a purpose to the historical narratives of St Mary's, besides the more obvious of relating how the church came to be. These narratives act as a means to bind members of the church together. Whilst the church's identity as an Anglican church is transmitted through more formal aspects such as its liturgy, I would argue that historical narratives – texts such as *Potty Pilgrims*, for example – act in a similar but more informal way. By the congregation participating in this shared history of the church, it should not matter, therefore, where individual members of the congregation come from, or how different their backgrounds. The narratives also reinforce the church's identity more widely. The pilgrimage day for example, which originates out of the church's history, is a public demonstration of Anglican Christianity in such a multi-faith part of London. That is not to suggest that all members of the congregation necessarily accept this without question. There are areas of contestation. For example, there are members of the congregation who do not participate in the pilgrimage, or do not participate in the Marian aspects of the church. Rather than just passive, accepting recipients of historical information, in the final section of this chapter, it is shown how different people actively engage with this history.

## Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to explore interactions between history, narrative and place at St Mary's. In this chapter, it was shown how important these stories are to members of the congregation and helped contribute to their own narratives of their religious experiences at St Mary's. The chapter began by looking at stories of the origins of church and shrine. The church was alleged to have been founded during the reign of Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan. I suggested that such narratives served as a way of authenticating the shrine as well as creating an identity for the church and its congregation. The chapter then went on to look at the stories of the shrine when the Marian pilgrimage was at its most popular and the subsequent destruction of the shrine during the Reformation. The final section of the chapter looked at the construction of St Mary's as a special place for members of the congregation and the part historical narratives played in this construction. The chapter suggested that worshippers are active participants in these narratives. Here, history is 'alive'. As Coleman argues, 'the past has the power to reach into our lives.'<sup>327</sup> People actively engage with history to create a special or sacred place in the present.

This approach was necessary in order to establish the specific historical context of the black Madonna at St Mary's. The inclusion of interviews with the congregation was important, as this is something that has been lacking from previous research in the field of black Madonna research. In contrast with the existing literature, the results from the interviews demonstrate that we cannot assume that the black Madonna makes the church 'special'. As pointed out at the beginning of this research, St Mary's is an Anglican rather than a Catholic church so the relationship with the black Madonna may be

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<sup>327</sup> Simon Coleman, "Mary on the Margins? The Modulation of Marian Imagery in Place, Memory and Performance," *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), p.19.



different. In this chapter, I think this was demonstrated by the sense that although the black Madonna is not unimportant, the overall history of the church was just as important to the congregation. This is certainly a theme that I will be returning to in the following chapters.

## **Chapter Five - 'There's always a Mary somewhere' - Re/Creating a Black Madonna in Willesden**

In the previous chapter, the focus was on the early years of St Mary's church, leading up to the destruction of the shrine during the Reformation, with a briefer mention of the reintroduction of an image of the Virgin during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The focus in this chapter shifts away from the past, to current Marian devotion and to the image of the black Madonna that now resides in St Mary's church. The 'Re/Creating' of the black Madonna of the title of this chapter refers firstly to the artistic creation of a modern black Madonna, to replace the one allegedly destroyed; and secondly to the creation of the relationships, both negative and positive, between the Madonna and parishioners of St Mary's. Besides the image of the black Madonna, it should be noted there are other images of Mary found in the church. These include the gold image mentioned in the previous chapter, several icon style pictures of Mary, a statue of Mary with her mother St Anne and images of Mary in the stained glass windows. In the words of one parishioner, 'wherever you are in church if you turn a little bit there's always a Mary somewhere.'<sup>328</sup>

In the previous chapter I observed that in terms of the history of the church and its importance, the black Madonna was not quite as significant as might have been expected. I argued that this was in contrast to other research on black Madonnas, such as those highlighted in chapter three<sup>329</sup> that positioned the black Madonna as inherently special when compared to other representations of the Virgin Mary. The aim of this chapter is to explore whether there were any specific aspects of devotion amongst the congregation that included the black Madonna and whether the views expressed by this congregation in any challenged the interpretations of the black Madonna discussed in chapter three. In order to do this, this chapter utilises information gained in interviews with members of

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<sup>328</sup> Quote from taped interview, September 2009

<sup>329</sup> Works such as Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin, and would be included here as an example.

the congregation and covers three main themes. Firstly, it deals with the creation of the statue; secondly, it looks at the wider features of Marian devotion at St Mary's and thirdly it examines the relationship between blackness and the black Madonna.

In an article discussing the material culture of Marian devotion, Coleman considers:

the problem of how to bridge the human and divine worlds in aesthetic as well as material terms. More specifically, how can we assert that an object made by a mere mortal can point us towards the transcendent?<sup>330</sup>

As Coleman points out, one of the ways in which this problem has been dealt with, has been to ascribe the creation of this art either to heavenly hands as in the case of Our Lady of Guadalupe, or to the explanation that St Luke was responsible for carving or painting the images. One of the interesting aspects of researching a modern black Madonna has been the opportunity to speak to the artist that created her. Unlike other black Madonna images where the original artist is unknown, we know precisely who made this statue. This removes the air of mystery that so often accompanies these images but instead offers an opportunity to look at the relationship between the artist and the creation of a piece of devotional art.

The wider features of Marian devotion considered in this chapter include personal devotions that take place such as prayers and healings; the theological significance afforded to Mary and the connections between Mary and mothering/motherhood. Considering these aspects of devotion also allows for exploration of issues of gender in the context of a black Madonna shrine. Gender is an important aspect in approaching

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<sup>330</sup> Simon Coleman, "Mary: Images and Objects," *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London and New York: Continuum, 2007). p.399

religion as lived. McGuire has argued that when we explore peoples' lived religious lives:

We realize the considerable complexity of all the ways people's religion and spirituality are linked with their gender expectations of self and others, their relationships with human and divine others, and their root sense of identity and community.<sup>331</sup>

So much has been written on the symbol of Mary and her place in both reinforcing and liberating gender roles; her place as a symbol of the sacred feminine in a male-centred religion<sup>332</sup> any exploration of Mary and gender is not straightforward. As Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans observe:

From the 1970s onward, liberation theology and feminist theology have heralded Mary as an alternative role model for women, one whose reign in heaven could be seen as an indicative of female power. They viewed Mary as the strong determined woman who takes action in situations of injustice. At the same time, scholars were critical of mainstream theology, addressing the historical manipulation of Mary by religious power holders to impose a form of femininity characterized by modesty, purity, obedience and sacrificial motherhood.<sup>333</sup>

In the previous chapter, I pointed out how the black Madonna had become somewhat separated from figure of the Virgin Mary. From the interviews conducted with the

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<sup>331</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. p.160.

<sup>332</sup> See for example Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. See in particular Chapter Two: The Many Names for the Mother of God, pp.48-72.

<sup>333</sup> Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans, "Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage," *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009). p.5.

congregation at St Mary's, this separation was not so apparent. Whilst there were differing levels of interest in, or devotion to the Virgin Mary, it was clear that she was in no way considered separately from the image of black Madonna. Only in one instance, which I deal with later in the chapter, was there any suggestion of a separation between the Virgin Mary and the image of the black Madonna within the church. In this chapter therefore I have chosen not to distinguish between devotion to the Virgin Mary and the black Madonna, but rather to consider them as one figure. To distinguish between the two in my own research would mean perpetuating the dualism I was critical of in the chapter three.

As discussed in chapter three, interpretations of the black Madonna have been influenced by feminist spirituality. Such interpretations tended to read the black Madonna in particular ways: as the embodiment of a female archetype as demonstrated in the work of Ean Begg and Fred Gustafson and as a more powerful and liberating alternative to white Madonnas as demonstrated by the work of Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum.<sup>334</sup> In terms of the overall objectives of this research, this chapter aims to provide an exploration of a black Madonna located in an Anglican shrine. Given the sometimes complicated relationship which Anglicanism<sup>335</sup> has with the Virgin Mary, this chapter also considers whether Mary is a problematic figure in any way to members of the congregation.

In the course of my fieldwork, I was questioned by members of the St Mary's congregation as to the reasons black Madonnas existed: what did they represent? On several occasions, which I discuss in this chapter, this was either preceded by, or followed by a discussion as to what Mary's skin colour would have been. In chapter three of this research, the complexities of linking literal and symbolic blackness in relation to

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<sup>334</sup> Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin*, Gustafson, *The Black Madonna*. and Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy*.

<sup>335</sup> See for example, Williams, "The Virgin Mary in Anglican Tradition."

black Madonnas were identified. In this chapter, there is a return to these complexities, which are explored in the context of a black Madonna shrine situated in a multi-cultural area of London.

### **‘Something more in keeping with their glorious past’<sup>336</sup> - The black Madonna returns to Willesden**

The image of the black Madonna was commissioned in 1972 by the Parochial Church Council in order to replace the image destroyed in the Reformation. Although the church already had the gold image of the Virgin installed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was described as ‘pleasing’, but ‘unremarkable’. Instead, ‘for a long time the people of St Mary's wished for something better - something more in keeping with their glorious past’.<sup>337</sup> The parish magazine reported the excitement and anticipation whilst waiting for the statue's arrival and pondered on how beneficial it would be for church once the statue arrived, although this would mean some co-operation on the part of the congregation:

All being well our new statue of Our Lady of Willesden will be in position early in April, together with the corona which stands behind it. There will still be a few alterations to be made in the chapel, but we have decided to leave them until later in the year. I hope it will be possible one day to do something about the south aisle so that the whole side of the church from the baptistry to the chapel will be seen as a unity.

When the new statue is in we can expect a great increase for visitors to the church and I think we shall have to arrange some kind of roster so as to be able to keep

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<sup>336</sup> Quote taken from St Mary's website. See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Virgin5-2.html> Accessed 1/01/2012.

<sup>337</sup> Quote taken from St Mary's website. See <http://www.stmarywillesden.org.uk/Virgin5-2.html> Accessed 1/01/2012.

the church doors open as they always used to be. It is unfortunately quite impossible to leave church open and unattended, and it is equally out of the question to expect me or Mrs Cleaver to be on hand whenever a chance visitor chooses to come. It only requires a person to be about the place – perhaps reading a book on the back pew - to ensure good behaviour, and I do not think a roster should be beyond us.<sup>338</sup>

All being well our new statue will be in position.<sup>339</sup> Actually it ought to be erected on June 1<sup>st</sup> so that you will have seen it before you read this letter but in recent months I have been so disappointed by so many delays and postponements that I never know what to expect.<sup>340</sup>

The artist chosen to create the new statue was sculptor Catharni Stern. Catharni was brought onto the project by church architect Andrew Carden, whom she knew before the project began. She was given artistic freedom as to what the statue looked like. As to what influenced her choice of design, she explained: ‘I think probably I had in my mind some of the more primitive icons throughout history rather than the brilliant and the very sophisticated Madonnas you see in all the Catholic churches for instance’.<sup>341</sup> She explained that she liked the black Virgin at Rocamadour because of its more primitive appearance. The Madonna she created for Willesden was likewise ‘quite primitive’.<sup>342</sup>

This choice of the word primitive is an interesting one in relation to the black Madonna. There is no wish here to ascribe meanings to Catharni’s words that she did not intend. Nevertheless, it is difficult to hear the word ‘primitive’ in relation to the black Madonna and not consider the point made by Mariana Torgovnik that such a word has certain

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<sup>338</sup> Entry in parish magazine, dated 21<sup>st</sup> March 1972.

<sup>339</sup> It was hoped the statue would be in place for the Pilgrimage Day that was to take place in July.

<sup>340</sup> Entry in parish magazine, dated 28<sup>th</sup> May 1972.

<sup>341</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2008.

<sup>342</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2008.

negative associations; In her work on the concept of ‘primitive’ in Western art and culture, Torgovnik argues that in this concept has a ‘nexus of associations’ with ‘women, sex, death, mortality.’<sup>343</sup> As demonstrated in chapter three, the black Madonna has been linked with similar tropes.

Catharni had specific aims in creating the image:

I also had Jesus with his arms out, indicating the forerunning of the cross but also the smile because I thought so much Christian iconography is miserable. An awful lot of Christian misery, it’s awfully miserable, you sort of feel that anything enjoyable is wicked (laughs) and I thought – no! He gave us a great message you know, so he should look happy and also the sort of feeling that he was bringing everybody in.<sup>344</sup>

After Catharni’s comment about wickedness and Christianity, I asked her whether she regularly created religious images:

Not specifically. If I’m asked, yes, it is always a little bit of a thing actually because I always think of the second commandment, which is thou shalt not make a graven image (laughs). Which disturbs me a little bit actually.

ML: What disturbs you? Is it the fact you do them or the fact - ?

CS: Both! (laughs).<sup>345</sup>

I then asked her about her own religious upbringing:

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<sup>343</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1990). p.156.

<sup>344</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2008.

<sup>345</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2008.



Well, what should I say? Thoroughly middle class, but I do come from a very religious family on one side, the other side is a bit wicked (laughs). My brother says he is torn; he said 'I am torn between the very good side and the wicked side', which of course is much more fun.<sup>346</sup>

Whilst not professing any particular faith, helping to create a religious image has made this artist reflect on the religious symbolism of her art and the possible religious implications of her actions. Catharni expressed surprise that the process of creating the Willesden Madonna went so smoothly and mused that it was 'almost as though someone else was using my hands, I really do, it really was quite extraordinary that;'<sup>347</sup> demonstrating what Coleman describes as 'the constant exchange between image and humans.'<sup>348</sup> In this case, Catharni's humour reveals that such an exchange may have an unexpected playful dimension.

When asked about the process of making the statue, she described how it took about six weeks:

I lived on the Hythe [in Colchester, Essex] in these tiny little cottages along the quay and I had a really a shed almost, at the back. But, a very a great friend of mine, who was a very good cabinet maker, he helped me slab... because she's made out of slabs, of lime, planks, great planks about that thick and they were glued together with an industrial glue, and he helped me do all that, all the clamping and everything. I did have a lot of help.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2008.

<sup>347</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2008.

<sup>348</sup> Coleman, "Mary: Images and Objects." p.400.

<sup>349</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2008.

The sculpture was made out of lime wood, which is lighter coloured. The statue was then darkened with a special stain and polished to make it look like ebony. As pointed out in chapter four, there is an alleged description of the original statue as being made of a wood like ebony. However, Catharni did not mention as to whether this description had any influence over her interpretation. The statue was finally installed in the church in June 1972. The parish magazine reported at the time:

The statue, as you know, is now safely in and I think it is very wonderful. The sculptress is Miss Catharni Stern. She has given the Virgin a look of dignified calm that I find most moving. Our Lord on the other hand, looks happy and eager. I love the way the Virgin appears to be effacing herself and presenting her Son to the World, as though she is trying to show He is the one who matters and not herself.

I am very pleased too that the younger members of our congregation like the statue so much. I think a number of our older members had expected something more simple and perhaps less challenging. Even so, a lot more of them have told me they like it better as they see it more. It is nice to know it is our very own and there is not another like it anywhere. It is not a copy though I have no doubt that as the years pass it will itself be copied.<sup>350</sup>

The image of the black Madonna, along with other representations of Mary in the church, may seem to reflect an excess of Marian imagery in an Anglican church. In light of this, it can be argued that the above comment in the parish magazine, on the positioning of

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<sup>350</sup> Entry in parish magazine, dated 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1972.

Mary and Christ in this image is revealing. As Paul Williams and Coleman have suggested, the place of Mary in the Anglican tradition is not a simple one. Whilst Mary has been a point of division for Anglicans and Roman Catholics,<sup>351</sup> within the Anglican tradition itself, the place of Mary 'is assured' because of her place 'in the Gospel tradition, but the way in which that place is celebrated by Anglicans has varied greatly and it continues to do so.'<sup>352</sup>

The place of the Virgin Mary in St Mary's church reflects this at times complex relationship. The black Madonna there is a large, imposing figure, made in the tradition of the seated Virgin in majesty pose. As one parishioner commented, 'you can't miss her really.'<sup>353</sup> Yet for the observer in the quote above at least, this image is interpreted as one where she is subordinate to her son. That the reaction to the image was not universally positive reinforces these complexities. One interviewee remarked that although he was not quite sure why, reinstating the Madonna was not an easy process: 'There was talk when, it came in Father Mason's time, and there was talk about whether it was a good thing to resurrect, to have the statue bought back here, for various reasons.'<sup>354</sup> One can only speculate as to whether the colour of the image was in anyway instrumental in making the image 'challenging.' This is not mentioned in the parish magazine's reports.

One interviewee who did talk about the initial negative reactions to the statue explained that until the statue was reintroduced, there was not a great Marian devotion within the church. She thought that the reason the statue was initially put in the side chapel was 'so those that didn't like that sort of churchmanship wouldn't be offended.'<sup>355</sup> The side

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<sup>351</sup> Coleman, "Mary on the Margins? The Modulation of Marian Imagery in Place, Memory and Performance." p.21.

<sup>352</sup> Williams, "The Virgin Mary in Anglican Tradition."

<sup>353</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>354</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2009.

<sup>355</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009

chapel then became the shrine. She described how a lot of people did not like the style of the statue: 'It's big and the hands are big, that was the thing that people kept saying. There was a lot of reservation about it. Over the last thirty years it's become more and more part of church life here.'<sup>356</sup>

### **'I am always aware of where she is.' – Locating the Black Madonna in a Parish Church**

In this section, I introduce some differing views on the importance of the black Madonna within the congregation. The location of the black Madonna in this section is both the physical location of the statue, but also in trying to locate the black Madonna within the devotional practices of those who worship at the church. The black Madonna at St Mary's has proved to be a restless one, moving from one part the church to another. As one interviewee remarked 'It's been there on that wall there and then it was over this side and then it was out in the chancel, wasn't it? It was put out there and then it's in this corner.'<sup>357</sup> Another interviewee also commented on the statue's wanderings:

I: She used to always be where the altar is in the chapel – so against that window.

ML: Is that in the small chapel?

I: The chapel beside the chancel, yes. And there's a small altar under the window straight ahead as you go in and she used to be on what she's on now, as she's been on various things; and then I think one pilgrimage she was moved out to where she is now, but she did go back in and in fact in a couple of pilgrimages she went walkabout. Did someone tell you about that? (laughs)

ML: Yes, I've heard about this, on the trolley.

I: Yes, that was lovely but that was quite an effort. For quite a long time she was

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<sup>356</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009

<sup>357</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2009.

angled in the chapel with a small thing under her, and then she got moved out there and has stayed there for some time now and the chapel is now being used much more for mid-week worship and things.<sup>358</sup>

The position of the black Madonna appeared to depend on factors such as whether renovation works were taking place; whether it was pilgrimage day; or where a particular priest felt she suited best. Here two interviewees reveal differing attitudes as to how significant this positioning was. Asked if she thought the position of the black Madonna mattered, the interviewee above replied:

I think it does. Oh, at one stage – you know where we were sitting on Saturday morning? She was opposite that, under the window – I can't remember why, I think it was while there was work being done in the chapel or something, and really it was quite nice having her there, because on a Sunday morning, when we said the Angelus, we would turn towards her. But now that she's where she is, that's somehow that's got dropped a bit – even though it would be perfectly easy to, because she is part of it. Yes, I am always aware of where she is.<sup>359</sup>

Dubisch has argued that images of Mary '*embody* her power to make it real in the here and now.' This makes the use of the images of Mary during the Angelus especially intense. The Angelus celebrates the devotion of the Incarnation. Dubisch explains that in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions it is 'this linkage of the spiritual and material that makes Mary – the vehicle through which the divine became flesh, the

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<sup>358</sup> Quote from taped interview, September 2009.

<sup>359</sup> Quote from taped interview, September 2009.

Theotokos or “God-bearer” – a particularly powerful figure.’<sup>360</sup> Despite this interviewee seeing the position of the black Madonna important, this may have been because this was an image of Mary, rather than any special feelings towards the image as a black Madonna. During the interview, this person did not make direct references to the black Madonna itself as particularly special.

Another interviewee thought the position of the black Madonna mattered so she could be seen properly:

For a while she was on the side of where we’ve got all the wooden bits still in the chapel. She was very out of the way, because the thing is with the chapel, if you don’t go in there, you don’t see what’s in there, so I think she’s better, she got moved out for a pilgrimage and never got moved back again, which is fine. I think she is better where she is because she is more visible really.<sup>361</sup>

However, she also felt that there were other more important aspects to the church; this despite being someone who was comfortable with Marian devotions overall and also attended the pilgrimage to Walsingham: ‘But I mean the black Madonna, in a way it’s a kind of a, it’s... (laughs) forgive me mother, it’s a sideline. Even if I’d known it was a shrine church, that isn’t what would have drawn me to it, um. It is more... it’s the worship that will keep me there.’<sup>362</sup> The particular position of the black Madonna was not important from a devotional point of view because the church contained so many other images of Mary:

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<sup>360</sup> Jill Dubisch, "Epilogue: The Many Faces of Mary," Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009). pp.233-234.

<sup>361</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>362</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

But I guess because we've got so many of them with the icon at this end and the statue and that end – it doesn't really matter where you in church, you're going to be facing something, you know (laughs) because of the church set into the round there. But I'm not so sure it's a conscious decision... I'm not sure it matters really.<sup>363</sup>

As an Anglican church – even one that celebrates the Angelus – an image of Mary alone is, perhaps, not quite as powerful as in the Orthodox or Catholic traditions. For the above interviewee, whilst the images of Mary were important, there was an icon of Christ that was significant:

If I'm honest, I use the two icons we've got up in the Chancel – we've got one of Christ the teacher and the other one is the Madonna and Child – and I mean, I love sitting up in that chancel. I use the statues as a focus, or rather the icons as a focus, more than I use the image, and we've got the icon at the back on the organ balcony; I don't use that one so much either really, but it's nice to know it's there.<sup>364</sup>

The mention of an image Christ as a focus for devotional purpose rather than the black Madonna is noteworthy. In chapter three I drew attention to Deana Weibel's work on goddess feminists' approach to and interpretation of black Madonnas.<sup>365</sup> As she demonstrated, for those worshippers, Christ was deliberately left out of any devotional practices. In contrast to the situation at St Mary's, although the black Madonna is a strong image, Christ remains the central focus. This is a point to which I return in chapter

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<sup>363</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>364</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>365</sup> Weibel, "The New Age and the Old World: The Interpretation and Use of European Shrines by 'Religious Creatives'".

seven on the place of Mary and Christ on pilgrimage day. I would argue that this further reinforces the importance of considering black Madonnas in a Christian context and from a Christian point of view. These differences are reinforced by the interviewee below. For this interviewee, in contrast to the previous interviewees, to join in with Marian devotions was not always easy, particularly as she had not been part of a Marian tradition previously:

But the fact we had a black Madonna or even a Madonna at all was completely just... there wasn't any great meaning because as I say I wasn't brought up with a Marian tradition, we never at my church said a Hail Mary, the Hail Mary was always said by Catholics. It was never said by Church of England people and that took a little bit of doing.<sup>366</sup>

Another interviewee also had reservations regarding these devotions: 'Even now I have reservations about certain things. Like I don't really believe in the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. They're not really Anglican beliefs.' However, she suggested that it was possible for the way one practised their faith to change and recognised that the relationship between the Virgin Mary and Christ needed to be taken into consideration:

Your faith grows. The devotion to Mary has grown in me I think over the years. As far as I am concerned Mary is the mother of Jesus, who must be very dear to Jesus and therefore must be dear to us.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>367</sup> Quotes taken from taped interview, November 2009



In chapter three I showed how it was often assumed that the meanings and significance accorded the black Madonna were universal. One of the overall aims of this research was to focus on one particular shrine and explore how the black Madonna functioned within that shrine. By approaching the subject in this way, one could explore whether the shrine at St Mary's either confirmed or disputed some of those previous assumptions. The above interviews provide good examples of why this approach is central. The place of the black Madonna at St Mary's appears to dispute some of the universal claims for the black Madonna. The more difficult relationship which someone as an Anglican might have with the Virgin Mary is further highlighted by the observations and comments made by the interviewees below.

### **'A very, very small part of me is far more for Christ' – Aspects of Marian Devotion at St Mary's**

In the following section, I have chosen to concentrate on interviews conducted with two particular individuals: the first a white male, the second a black female.<sup>368</sup> In comparison to other interviews, both of these interviewees spoke in much more depth about the black Madonna and Marian devotions. This section considers the wider aspects of Mary and the black Madonna. Although both interviewees were comfortable with Marian devotions, one expressed some of the reservations they had with the personal and theological implications of the Virgin Mary. The other interviewee had experiences of the emotional support and healing afforded by the Virgin Mary, but had met with resistance from others regarding the level of Marian devotions at the church.

The first interviewee was keen to link the black Madonna in his own church with those black Madonnas further afield:

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<sup>368</sup> As discussed in chapter two, for reasons of confidentiality more detailed biographical information on interviewees is not available.

For us its exciting in some ways because you've got Santiago de Compostela, you've got other churches in Europe like Montserrat; you've got lots of others for them to be themselves, places to go and visit. I've set myself the target that if I'm still around in two years I'm going to go and visit those black Virgins in Europe.<sup>369</sup>

The black Madonna at their own church was significant because: 'As far as I'm concerned the fact that it is a black Virgin is for me summarising... it's alive and [a] real thing, it has to be because it is a representation of the Blessed Virgin.'<sup>370</sup> Despite such an acknowledgement, he explained that 'I've never been a devotee of the Marian tradition because I've never had enough history, enough context and enough power in it.'<sup>371</sup> He explained that he had not been brought up in the Marian tradition and although he did accept some devotion to Mary, it was not simply a matter of transitioning from one tradition to another:

I subscribe to the prayers and the concepts of her being Mother of God, Blessed Mary. When I go to Walsingham, I subscribe to it wholly and join in with the worship and feel part of that worship. But I suppose a very, very small part of me is far more for Christ and for the Father Almighty himself and that for me, my earliest days are firmly embedded in the Trinity and that's where so essentially far from being a male thing to a female thing, it is purely and simply that every bit of my life right the way up to 1988 – which is a long time from 1947 to 1988 – that's a long time to be in one tradition, so I can't deny that is embedded in my

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<sup>369</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>370</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>371</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

mind and figures in my overall prayer life, relating to the substance of Mary and the Black Virgin.<sup>372</sup>

This interview excerpt demonstrates that we cannot ignore how important a persons' religious background is when considering how they worship now. In the instance given above, the person chose to tell us that he felt their religious upbringing was important to the way he worships now, even though he may have moved into some areas of devotion which he did not experience growing up. As McGuire has pointed out:

At the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even coherent. We should expect that all persons' religious practices and the stories with which they make sense of their lives are changing, adapting, and growing.<sup>373</sup>

This interviewee stated quite clearly that his religious practices were changing, growing and adapting as McGuire suggested:

Going back [to] what we said at the beginning... so in that sense Mary and the Marian tradition has a life of its own in my mind and my feelings. And as the years have gone by I see more of the life of Mary and see myself more in context with it, but I'm still on a journey, so I'm a long way back from people who have subscribed to the Marian tradition since childhood. And I'm trying to absorb the Trinity and put the Trinity alongside my Marian tradition, and making it into a complete picture that is right for me as an individual and in terms of my worship.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>373</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life. p.12.

<sup>374</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

The point here is we should consider the totality of a person's religious experiences and not be tempted to see one part in isolation. This is important when dealing with worship of the black Madonna. As highlighted in chapters one and three in particular, there was a tendency to see the black Madonna in isolation from other aspects of Christianity, if she was even considered a Christian symbol at all. Jeanette Rodriguez, on the other hand, observed in her work on women's relationship with Our Lady of Guadalupe that this relationship was part of whole range of religious experiences in the lives of the women she interviewed. Although Guadalupe was important, there were other religious symbols and festivals that were equally important.<sup>375</sup>

This interviewee was prepared to attribute equal importance to Mary as to the Trinity, but at the same time both Mary and the Trinity were represented by a gendered binary that was reflected in humanity:

There's no schism in my mind, there's no sense of awareness of the – I suppose the difference of the Trinity and the so-called maleness, and the femaleness of Mary - because it is an essential part of human life, because there is male and female. There is this ultimate both difference and sameness that makes us human, and that is where God's influence is on us all the time. Whether we're made in God's image - ? I'm never quite sure of that, to be honest. I'm one of those “either/or” people when it comes to [whether] man was made in God's image; I would probably question that.<sup>376</sup>

Such contradictions are also apparent in considering Mary and issues of gender.

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<sup>375</sup> Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women. See in particular ‘Chapter 5 : Methodology and Research Findings’. pp.87-113.

<sup>376</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

I would argue that the comments of this interviewee demonstrate precisely the kind of complexity that Hermkens *et al* and McGuire talked about at the beginning to this chapter. These comments are not necessarily representative of the congregation. However, they connect to broader issues raised in chapter three by counteracting the privileging of goddesses and feminine archetypes in black Madonna literature. Although he acknowledged the power of Mary and the Marian tradition, he was nevertheless from an Anglican background and would not accept any attempt to present Mary as in any way divine:

I've even heard schism and saying she is Godlike in herself and I cannot accept [that] and I don't think that is right to do so, but there are people I have met who do feel that way and they're an extreme part of the Roman Church as a matter of fact; but that's something I'm at odds with, but other than that, yes, she is as far as I'm concerned the Mother of God and has given birth to the Saviour, and that's how I feel.<sup>377</sup>

The second interviewee in this section of the chapter talked about the direct effect Mary's power had in her personal life. For this person, Mary was central to her religious experiences: 'She is the church, Madonna is the church. I mean I go in there and I lean in front of her and I always ask for a blessing and I know she will guide me in her own way, I feel it.'<sup>378</sup>

She explained how a relative who was initially sceptical about the style of worship at St Mary's because it was too boring. The interviewee told her relative that she believed that God was present in the church and when the relative was in trouble, they were

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<sup>377</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>378</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, July 2010.

encouraged to pray at in front of the black Madonna. After praying, her relative experienced the power of the black Madonna at first hand:

She said, 'You wouldn't believe it but your Madonna lives in that church, I have experienced that. Remember you told me, I told you your church was boring, that there was no singing, no life was in the church, I was wrong.' She said, 'My husband was in trouble and you asked me to go and lean in front and you asked me to pray and she answered my prayer, so I'm very, very grateful.'

The power of Mary was so immense in this instance, that the interviewee's relative experienced not only the power but a vision of Mary herself:

She told me, 'She was there, I saw her coming to my aid, she was crossing the sea, in a vision I saw her, then I know that there is God. She has come and answered my prayer. After that my husband's trouble subsided'. So she knows that the black Madonna lives, so that is one example I can give you, so she is there, she helps; she is the church.<sup>379</sup>

Although this interviewee accepted the place and power of the Madonna at St Mary's, she had encountered resistance to this, experiencing direct challenges to the place of the black Madonna and Marian devotions in an Anglican church: 'People say: "Oh we don't want the Madonna there, why do we have to say the Hail Mary?" this and that. "This is the Church of England, so why should we have Mary or the black Madonna?" But for this interviewee: 'The Black Madonna is part of the Shrine we worship, so we accept it.'

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<sup>379</sup> Quotes taken from taped interview, July 2010

The interviewee countered these challenges with her own experiences of healing and prayer:

But she is part of the church, she is there with us. Either you believe it or you don't, it's up to the individual; but I know I believe it, she is there, she has answered my prayers, she has answered other peoples prayers like the someone I just mentioned to you so I know she is there.<sup>380</sup>

The above comment regarding the place of the Madonna at St Mary's reflects a wider Christian tradition of Mary representing the church. As Eva De Visscher observes: 'Her presence at the world's redemption, interpreted as full acceptance of God's will, forms the basis of the idea that Mary is the perfect type of both the Church and of every individual soul within it.'<sup>381</sup> The comment also echoes the image of Mary as Mother of Mercy, whom Charlene Spretnak describes: 'she looms as a huge cosmological figure holding open her cloak under which are sheltered the multitudes.'<sup>382</sup> It is in the roles of mediator and protector then, that Mary answers prayers as in the example above.

The experiences of the above interviewee in some respects reinforce the notion of the black Madonna as a powerful miracle worker made by previous research.<sup>383</sup> As the above quotes show, the healings and visions experienced by the interviewee and her family come directly from the black Madonna. However, the power of the black Madonna in this instance is coming from a Christian background, with the interviewee acknowledging the power of God as well the power of the black Madonna. This was interesting because as quotes from other interviewees in this chapter have shown the

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<sup>380</sup> Quotes taken from taped interview, July 2010

<sup>381</sup> Eve De Visscher, "Marian Devotion in the Latin West in the Later Middle Ages," Mary: The Complete Resource, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London and New York: Continuum, 2007). p.179

<sup>382</sup> Charlene Spretnak, Missing Mary (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004). p.91

<sup>383</sup> See for example Moss and Cappannari, "The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing."

black Madonna is not necessarily a focal point for prayers and devotion. Although she attends the same Anglican church as the male interviewee in this section, the second interviewee does not appear to acknowledge any possible conflict between her own devotion to either Mary or the black Madonna and attendance at an Anglican church.

### **‘Mary is the Mother of God and She is Our Mother’<sup>384</sup> – The Virgin Mary and Motherhood**

In chapter three, I argued that whilst the black Madonna was seen as an archetypal, mother goddess figure, associated with aspects such as fertility, the black Madonna as the mother of Christ was largely ignored. What is clear from these interviews is that the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, as the Mother of God, was central to the religious devotions of the two interviewees. In this section, the same two interviewees above talk about the Virgin Mary and her place as the Mother of God. Mary, as both Mother of God and the mother of the faithful, is a powerful figure. For example, Charlene Spretnak writes:

As the mother of Christians, and later the mother of the Christian Church, Mary was ever forbearing and compassionate, a fount of both divine grace and intercessory powers. In the course of two thousand years, she has no doubt been called upon and consulted in every possible trying situation, from the intimate to the societal.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Quote taken from interview, July 2010

<sup>385</sup> Spretnak, *Missing Mary*, pp.128-129.



In the first example below, the interviewee who already had a strong relationship with Mary herself described how Mary was incorporated into celebrations on Mothering Sunday, when the church held a special service:

With the children I will sometimes refer to the Madonna as an example. On Mothering Sunday I will refer to the Madonna - that Mary is the Mother of God and she is our mother. And that Black shrine is there; she actually appeared in that church years and years ago. That is the reason why she is there. So most of the older ones, although they've forgot about it then sometimes I remind them, why is that statue there? That is the Black Madonna, she is part of the church, she appeared here when there was trouble so she is here.

Mary's role as maternal intercessor had a special significance to this interviewee and her power in this role was evident:

People have seen a vision of her... maybe I have not seen a vision, but I know when you talk to her she listens and she answers your prayers in time; maybe not straight away but she will help you and she has helped me, so I always confide in her.

For the other interviewee, the discussion of Mary's motherhood turned to its theological significance, and he accepted that Mary was the Mother of God. For this interviewee, the black Madonna was a physical manifestation of Mary and this gave the image its power:

coming back to Mary, for me the Black Madonna represents a tangible and physical thing. It represents her, makes her Mother of God because she gave birth

to Christ who is the Son of God, so I can accept that because I have to because if I don't I just chuck out all my ideology out, baby with the bath water. I can't do that.<sup>386</sup>

To this interviewee, Mary as Christ's human mother was central because it was she who gave him his humanity. Both the humanity of Mary and Christ was then connected directly to the humanity of the congregation:

Very much so and there is that side of it. So when I try to connect it to my day to day I realise that when joining in with male and female in that congregation and being close to both women and men, and having that intimacy of that shared faith, that Mary has much part to play in the lives of a community like ours as anywhere else; and the fact it is a female and not a male saint is actually to the good in my opinion.<sup>387</sup>

This interviewee recognised that: 'Mary has a power of her own with regards to the community and her femaleness is an acceptance that females have a right to be in this and not part of God's real priesthood as they call it – I suppose that it's only men.' Once again, issues of gender and Mary are raised, this time in relation to the priesthood. But in recognition that this was a difficult issue the interviewee chose not to continue with this: 'I have my own opinion on that but I'm not trying to bring that into this discussion.'<sup>388</sup> I respected that decision and did not pursue it any further.

Dubisch argues that to concentrate on Mary as mother is not necessarily helpful in examining the significance of Marian symbolism. To understand the power Mary has, we

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<sup>386</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>387</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>388</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

should ‘move out of the domestic arena in which Mary is usually analysed’ and ‘move away from terms such as “mother worship” to which Marian devotion is sometimes reduced.’<sup>389</sup> Whilst I would agree with Dubisch that Mary as a symbolic figure is more than just that of mother, the reference to Mary as mother was prominent during my research at St Mary’s. It would have been difficult not to look at her role in these terms. The place of Mary as Mother was a powerful one for some at the church. For example, the service on Mothering Sunday at St Mary’s was a special service: one that honoured motherhood, both that of Mary and those in the congregation. The Virgin Mary featured prominently in the homily at the service. The priest spoke about how Anglicans sometimes are reluctant to talk about or acknowledge Mary. He explained that because of the shrine and the church being dedicated to Mary, there was perhaps a closer relationship to the Virgin here than at other churches.

The place of Mary as mother within the wider Christian tradition, however, is complicated one and has been used, as Dubisch quite rightly points out, as a means of reinforcing narrow, gendered roles for women, trying to emulate the perfection that Mary represents, by a male-dominated church. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the place of the Virgin Mary at this particular church needs to be understood from the perspective of Anglicanism. From the interviews quoted in this chapter, it is Mary as the human mother of Christ that was important and interviewees made it clear that they were approaching Mary from the perspective of Anglicans. Here there were some challenges to the way in which Marian devotion was encouraged by priests, with the celebrations of certain devotions, such as the Immaculate Conception, or the saying of the Hail Mary, not being seen as acceptable for some worshippers. The differences between church officials and members of the congregation at St Mary’s reflects the differing attitudes in the wider

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<sup>389</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, p.246.

Anglican church to the Virgin Mary as pointed out by Williams earlier in this chapter. This is in contrast to the conflicts between church authorities and worshippers identified by Begg and Chiavola Birnbaum, whereby the church has tried to downplay the devotions to the black Madonna. Once again the picture that emerges when one begins to find out how worshippers feel and engage with religious practices is a more complex one. The evidence from St Mary's suggests that some worshippers have reservations about the Marian devotions encouraged by church officials. However, unlike the suggestions by the likes of Begg, at St Mary's this was not specifically connected to the black Madonna

### **Blackness and the black Madonna**

In the first half of this research project, it was noted how so much meaning was attributed to black Madonnas, and how problematic the linking of race and symbolic blackness was in relation to these images. The connections between symbolic and real blackness and its relation to black Madonnas did arise during my research at St Mary's. Any significance that might be attributed to the colour of the black Madonna was questioned by some members of the congregation, yet paradoxically, there was recognition that it might still be important:

I1: For some reason if all of a sudden they said: 'Right, we're going to have a light Madonna', you know, a white one, you know, I don't think it would be the same. I don't know why.

I2: Well we're used to the black one.

I2: You get so used to it that in the end you just don't think that oh it's a black Madonna, you know, it's a Madonna.

I1: But the colour doesn't really come into it as such does it? Like, the black Madonna, you don't think of it...

I2: No, no.

I1: If you're praying there, you don't think, 'oh this is the black Madonna. It's just the Madonna.

I2: How do we see it? I don't.<sup>390</sup>

The possibility that the blackness of the Madonna was in some way related to actual skin colour was also raised by these members of the congregation:

I1: I can't understand why it's a black Madonna, that's what I've never been able to understand.

ML: What – the one that is here now?

I1: The black madonna, why they are black?

ML: We just don't know.

I2: Not because as such... I mean there's always been... Christ wasn't white, because he came from the Middle East so he'd be more black.

I3: Yeah.

ML: Well, some people have suggested that might be the reason.

I1: Wasn't he Jewish?

I2: Yes, but even if he was Jewish – over there because you're in the Middle East, you've got that olive skin.

I3: Yes, mmm.

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<sup>390</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, July 2009

A section of a documentary entitled *Reflecting Skin*, written and presented by Bonnie Greer<sup>391</sup>, had been filmed at St Mary's. The documentary screened by the BBC in 2004 considered the representation of black skin in Western art. Greer was filmed in conversation with theologian Sarah Jane Boss both inside and outside the church, discussing the significance of the black Madonna. The documentary came up in conversation with members of the congregation who had watched it. One person who had been present when the documentary was filmed commented:

I sat in church and watched them, it was all... well I don't [know] where they did the actually filming, that must have been done off site. All they did in there... it was all voice on tape, they stood in the Lady Chapel as it was there at the time and she just asked the questions; it was like a reporter doing an interview. Then she came back again and said, "would you like to have the tape that we've done?" and I said: 'Oh yes please.' When I first started it I thought: 'What's that got to do with black Madonnas?' because she is going back to her roots to Africa and she works upwards and then it comes into the Madonnas and then I thought: 'Now it's making sense.'<sup>392</sup>

Another individual, who was white, commented that they although she was aware other black Madonnas did exist, they had never thought of the statue at St Mary's as a 'black' Madonna – just 'the' Madonna. I asked her what she meant by her comment, explaining that I was interested in what people at the church thought about having a black Madonna in their church. She suggested that it was because she mixed socially with black people. Both sets of her neighbours were black and she had looked after their children. She had

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<sup>391</sup> Greer also presented a two part documentary on BBC Radio 4 on black Madonnas. *In Search of the Black Madonna* was aired in December 2000. Prior to the Radio 4 documentary, she wrote an article on black Madonnas for *The New Statesman* entitled 'Midnight Mass'. See <http://www.newstatesman.com/200012250052>.

<sup>392</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, July 2009.

other black friends, including people at church. For her, the colour of someone's skin was not significant. It was only after watching the documentary she thought 'Of course, the Madonna is black.'

The interviewee speaking below, who was herself black, had a very close relationship with the black Madonna but observed that not all black members of the congregation may feel as she did:

I don't know if that's how they view her importance in the church, I can't answer that – but I know how *I* perceive Mary, but others may have a different view. For example, someone I know didn't accept the Black Madonna in the church; she decided to leave the church but that is her own personal view – she wouldn't go into detail or anything.<sup>393</sup>

I acknowledge that the sample of respondents was too small to make many wider inferences regarding the ethnicity of worshippers and relationship with the black Madonna. However, among the parishioners I did speak to and from observations made during the fieldwork, connections between ethnicity and significance ascribed to the black Madonna were not especially pronounced; instead there was a range of views on the Madonna that cut across both racial and gender lines. For example, in one conversation with a black female parishioner, she explained that she was not aware that the statue actually represented Mary until someone pointed it out to her. She was not sure what the statue represented, but had not thought it might be Mary. If any inferences are to be made at all (and I would make these with caution), any relationship with Mary and by extension the black Madonna had more connection with how comfortable people felt

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<sup>393</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2010.

with Marian devotions generally. Assumptions as to how connected a person might be to the black Madonna based on either ethnicity or gender, would, I suggest, be misplaced.

As I have tried to show in earlier chapters, some existing areas of black Madonna scholarship have tried to make connections between symbolic and literal blackness, coupled with a view of black Madonnas as spiritually and politically more liberating than white Madonnas. But this has not always been convincing and such extrapolations are problematic. What I hope I have demonstrated in this chapter is why it is necessary therefore to examine black Madonnas in their individual social and historical contexts. Scheer has pointed out there is a precedent for strong reactions to black Madonnas, as if viewers cannot overcome the cognitive dissonance of seeing the Mother of God portrayed as a black woman.<sup>394</sup> The reactions and comments amongst parishioners I encountered were not as extreme as that. Nevertheless, the blackness of the Madonna in a multi-racial congregation is significant in that it has provoked discussion amongst worshippers. It is just possible that such dissonance could account for the reactions reported in the 1970s when the Willesden black Madonna was first sculpted. However, given the discussion had with parishioners, I would argue that just as significant in this instance is the place of the Virgin Mary within the Anglican Church. The comments made by interviewees has shown that there are a range of views on Mary and interviewees have discussed how comfortable or otherwise they were with Marian devotions, identifying that their religious backgrounds may have affected the ways in which they approach Mary.

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<sup>394</sup> Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meaning of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries."



## **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the place of the black Madonna at St Mary's church and the relationships created between the statue and members of the congregation. I began by looking at how the statue was created and the experiences of the artist in this creation. Although the artist concerned was not particularly religious, making religious art had given them pause for thought about what they were doing within this process. The artist also talked about how such religious art can provoke strong reactions. I then looked at the physical placement of the statue in the church. The statue had been moved around considerably and this had affected the ways in which it had been incorporated into services. Parishioners described their own experiences of worship and there were differing views as to how important the black Madonna and its location were to those experiences.

The chapter looked at wider aspects of Marian devotion at St Mary's. Here parishioners talked about personal devotions in connection with theological concerns about Mary. They also discussed healing experiences at the church and how important the black Madonna had been in that healing. The discussion then turned to the image of Mary as Mother. Once again there was a connection between someone's personal devotions to Mary and their understanding of the theology behind those devotions. It was clear that for those two interviewees, Mary as a mother figure was important; firstly in terms of her compassion and powers to heal, but also in a broader theological sense that being the Mother of God was central to her place in the church.

Lastly the chapter looked specifically at the blackness of the Madonna at St Mary's. As was pointed out, this is a black Madonna located in a multi-racial congregation. As to whether this was important, it was apparent that although there were a range of views and attitudes towards both the black Madonna and to the Virgin Mary more generally, these were not confined to one particular group within the congregation. The point was made that just as important in the case of St Mary's is the fact it is an Anglican church.

The purpose of chapter was to ascertain the significance of the black Madonna at St Mary's. As with the previous chapter, interviews with the congregation were central in order to explore the relationship between the congregation and the image. I would argue that the range of opinions towards the Virgin Mary, as represented by the black Madonna at St Mary's and the locating of the Virgin Mary as a Christian symbol, further reinforce the points made at the very beginning of this research: namely that the focus on one shrine and its congregation may challenge existing assumptions about the meanings of the black Madonna. In the next chapter the focus moves away from the Madonna to a broader examination of religious experience and practice at St Mary's.

## **Chapter Six - 'A seemly and most especially spiritual way to worship': Religious Expression and Experience at St Mary's**

This chapter offers an exploration of the different forms of religious expression and experience that take place at St Mary's church. Where the previous chapter centred on the Madonna, this chapter broadens the scope to include other aspects of everyday religious life at the church. There are several reasons for taking the more wide ranging approach adopted in this chapter. Firstly, it became clear from conducting interviews that there was much more to religion at St Mary's than the black Madonna. As demonstrated by comments in the previous chapter, for some people, the black Madonna featured little if not at all in their religious lives. Secondly, in chapter three I drew attention to the ways in which black Madonnas were disconnected from other aspects of Christianity. Including other aspects of worship at St Mary's is an attempt to prevent this happening in my research. Thirdly, the interviews here are used to examine ideas around lived religion. The concept of lived religion is important to the overall aims of the research and this chapter will allow for a wider application of this approach when examining the religious lives of the congregation at St Mary's.

The chapter looks at three areas: how people came to be part of the congregation of St Mary's; the material and emotional aspects of worship and the role of religious tradition in the way people worship. It begins by looking at how parishioners came to be part of the congregation of St Mary's. For some this journey was more complicated than others. People told stories of their religious upbringing; how they had converted or wished to convert to other branches of Christianity; and the difficulties they had faced in trying to find a church in which they were comfortable to worship. The reason for including stories of faith journeys is to show how different experiences of faith may be found in one congregation. As the previous chapter demonstrated, not all the parishioners at St

Mary's feel so drawn to the black Madonna. So if it is not the black Madonna that is drawing people to worship at St Mary's, this chapter looks at the other reasons people may have for attending their church. The chapter builds further on this by showing that there are often more practical reasons for people's choice of church. But that does not mean these stories are no less important or worthy of our attention.

The chapter then moves onto look at religion and materiality. By this I mean the ways in which people experience and express their religion through their bodies. In order to understand lived religious lives more thoroughly, we need to look at the material aspects of religion. As McGuire argues:

Lived religion is constituted by the practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live. And it comes into being through the often-mundane practices people use to transform these meaningful interpretations into everyday action. Human bodies matter, because those practices – even interior ones, such as contemplation – involve people's bodies, as well as their minds and spirits.<sup>395</sup>

This chapter will show how embodied practices involve emotion and memory.

Demonstrating that:

concrete body practices promote our sense of connection with our spiritual community (i.e. the others with whom we share collective memories and experiences). Our sense of connection – our identification with family,

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<sup>395</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life. p.98.

community and others – is based on a myriad of remembering practices, involving our bodies and emotions as well as our thoughts.<sup>396</sup>

These aspects of religious life are included here because so much of the religion I encountered at St Mary's was rooted in the material. To exclude it would be to exclude significant parts of people's religious lives. How people felt about their religious practices was also brought up during the research making it clear that emotional connections were important.

One of the possible criticisms of adopting a 'lived religion' approach as I have done in this research, is that by concentrating solely on non-institutional religious practices it ignores the ways in which people connect to and engage with official church teachings. This problem is particularly pertinent as existing research in black Madonna studies have not only concentrated on the more popular elements of religion but have seen official church doctrine largely in terms of hostility. For example, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's book *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy* looks at the ways in which two strands of radicalism, the religious and the political are tied together under the auspices of the black Madonna. Both the Catholic Church and the Italian state are seen as complicit in the oppression of ordinary people.<sup>397</sup>

From interviews and observations conducted at St Mary's, I would argue that the picture that emerges is a different from the one Chiavola Birnbaum describes. Whilst I am aware that people may not have expressed all their beliefs or opinions with a stranger, from what they did share, they did not express the same radical views on church hierarchy as found by Chiavola Birnbaum. People talked about why they practised in the way they

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<sup>396</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. p.99.

<sup>397</sup> Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy*.

did and how they engaged with the theology and the liturgy. They also expressed the problems they had with this practice, why they questioned some aspects of their faith and how they reconciled these problems. The final section of this chapter then, looks at how people engage with their religious traditions in different ways. This means looking at how people try to understand and make sense of the religious tradition in which they practise. This section demonstrates that people are actively engaging with their faith. They are not just passive receivers of theology imposed from them from outside. Using a ‘lived religion’ approach as far as this research is concerned, does therefore take into account the way in which everyday religious practice and beliefs connect with official aspects of religion.

### **‘I never would have gone to a different one’ – Journeys of Faith at St Mary’s**

As I recounted in chapter two, my earnest attempts to get at what meanings the church might have for parishioners were brought up short by one parishioner who explained they only attended the church because they lived a few minutes away. I am not suggesting the above comment in any way diminishes the ‘specialness’ of St Mary’s identified by other parishioners in previous chapters. What it does demonstrate is that St Mary’s is a repository for many, sometimes contradictory, stories. It also demonstrates that sometimes the responses we get in the course of our research are a lot more prosaic than perhaps what we were originally looking for. The more mundane and domestic aspects of the church that rely on human, not just divine works, may seem out of place in a piece of research on religious experience. However, the quote below demonstrates how the supposedly non-sacred, domestic activities – in this case church cleaning – can be instrumental in the relationships an individual may have with their church:

So you do get the feeling in some churches that if you're not prepared immediately to get on the cleaning rota or do something they won't consider you as being part of the congregation almost you know? And you get other churches where it's over the top and you're desperate to get out and they won't let you out the door coz they're being so friendly and all the rest of it you know.<sup>398</sup>

The people I spoke with gave varied explanations as to how they had come to worship at the church. These narratives of their faith journeys were sometimes detailed and circuitous ones. They demonstrated that not all these journeys were smooth ones. For those who had a more straightforward route to the church, the primary reason for choosing St Mary's was that it was their local church. One parishioner said that they had started to coming to St Mary's because their place of work was nearby. They did not live in the immediate area but had begun coming to the church because it was easier to fit around their work. Even though they had now retired, they still maintained the connection with the church.

Another interviewee explained:

Oh, it's the local church, I never would have gone to a different one, that was never the issue; it was more sort of getting into the routine of going to church again, and when my sister's second two children were both baptised here and she started going regularly once she had children, she was living not far away and because she'd lived with me when I first moved in and before she got married, you know, this was the local church.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>399</sup> Quote from interview, September 2009.

A change in circumstances gave them more time to become involved with the church and its activities. This person was representative of many others at St Mary's who did not just worship there, but committed themselves to working in and supporting the church in other ways. To give some examples of this support: people were on church committees; they were church wardens; they cleaned the church and brought flowers to decorate it; they ran the Sunday school and youth group and they organised social or fundraising events. These activities demonstrate that for at least some of the congregation, religious commitment is not just about attendance at church services.

Having children who attended St Mary's Primary School was a factor in attending the church. The school is very near the church so it made sense for parents to join the same church as their children: 'I wanted the children to attend church regularly so I made every effort to take them to church. I also took part in school activities and attended church services which involved the children.' This same person was then confirmed themselves giving them 'a responsibility as a member to attend church regularly.'<sup>400</sup>

There were clearly strong emotional experiences involved in finding a church, or moving from one church to another. This interviewee suggested that she felt there was considerable emotional investment involved in finding a place of worship:

because it's a big thing when you're part, to be part of a church community, especially when you're on your own as I am, to make that change to move. It's quite a big thing because you're leaving behind friends and established ties, you know. And branching out new, I'm not a very brave person.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Quote from written reflection, December 2010

<sup>401</sup> Quote from interview, April 2010.



Another interviewee described how she was: 'christened in this church, then I married a Catholic and it was fifteen years before I became a Catholic and then I lost my husband; I came down and these lovely people took me in.'<sup>402</sup> Her experience in the Catholic church after her bereavement was not a happy one and she was glad to be back at St Mary's.

What the comments from interviewees above demonstrate is that there are numerous factors as to why someone chose to attend St Mary's and what stands out here is the absence of the black Madonna. None of the people mentioned the black Madonna as a reason for attending the church. I would argue that, as in the previous chapter, it may be the Anglicanism of the church that means the black Madonna does not have a central role to play in attracting people to the church. This is in contrast to the studies of the black Madonna examined in chapters one and three, whereby the black Madonna was seen as a powerful figure for those attending a shrine.

The decision on whether to convert to another faith had meant a complicated journey for one interviewee. This is the same white male interviewee who had talked in depth about his devotions to Mary in chapter four. He had been brought up in the local area and along with his family attended another Anglican church near to where they lived. When the family decided to leave the church and find another place to worship, this interviewee came to St Mary's. The interviewee explained that he 'went for a journey about six years ago to see if I wanted to be a Roman Catholic so I was away from St Mary's for a couple of years.' The decision to return to St Mary's and Anglicanism was based on emotion as much as it was theology:

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<sup>402</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2009.

I came back because that's where I found I really needed to be. So I went away, I wanted to see what the dogma, what the assertions and dogma were in the Roman Church and decided that it was a little too rigid for me so I came back because the Church of England offered more freedom and more ability to express yourself and that's why I came back to St Mary's. It's the form of worship, the style and form of worship and the liturgy and its relevance to me as an individual and to us collectively as a congregation that makes a difference .<sup>403</sup>

I asked what it was he was looking for but did not find in the Roman Catholic Church:

They don't seem to have an idea about the quality of music for one thing, nor do they seem to have a sense of the rubric of the church in itself – a vehicle for expression. It seems so much of it sadly appeared to be done by rote; that is very insulting to say, but that is what I felt.<sup>404</sup>

Despite deciding to remain an Anglican, he acknowledged spiritual attachment to some aspects of Catholicism:

the only place I ever felt different, which is still I have to say my big spiritual home is Westminster Cathedral. I love the cathedral more than the abbey, more than St Paul's. It to me has the ultimate sense of the power of the spirit in it. Not only does it have a magnificent organ, so do the other two, so music is still there, but there I think the liturgy is more alive.

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<sup>403</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>404</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.

I also discovered in St Paul's bookshop inside Westminster Cathedral that there was a man there who was one of a very large group of Anglicans who all converted to Catholicism in one lump, there were something like 180 of them and they were all in parishes around Crouch End and North London so that was quite interesting for me and that's what led to think I might want to carry on doing it but he said it's a very lonely test for you and he said you may or you may not come through this and I didn't. I didn't pass that test if you want to call it that way.<sup>405</sup>

It may seem difficult to understand how someone could fail 'to pass the test' of conversion and yet still find some spiritual connection in the faith which failed them. But as McGuire points out, when we look into lived religious lives, we do not always find a straightforward, rational following of the rules. She explains that: 'it is clear that individuals are not limited to a single religious option. Their personal religious practices can be informed by many sources, of which a particular religion may be just one – even if an important one – among many cultural resources.' Even someone as deeply religious as the interviewee above might not necessarily have:

a single religious identity – like a master or core identity. Rather, from many and often diverse cultural resources, the individual constructs a personal identity amalgam that may blend or draw serially on different elements, foregrounding some elements in one social context and deemphasizing them.<sup>406</sup>

In the case of the interviewee above, he takes part in Anglican services and identifies himself as Anglican. But even after a difficult journey towards conversion and back, he

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<sup>405</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>406</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life. p.209.

found they can be emotionally moved by the building, music and liturgy of Catholicism when in Westminster Cathedral. I would argue that this illustrates the flexibility of religion an individual can maintain. Although as demonstrated in the previous chapter this individual had a strong sense of Marian devotion and interested in the black Madonna, this was not their only reason for attending St Mary's. Once again, there is a sense that the black Madonna is not the central focus of the church for worshippers, even when they do express Marian devotions.

Others I spoke to had similarly complex journeys to St Mary's. In both of the examples below, this involved literal as well as metaphorical journeys. The first interviewee had moved to London from another part of the country. In between the journey to London, she had also been to university. Throughout this time, she described how trying to find a place to worship was quite a difficult challenge. On trying to find a church locally in London, she said it took her a long time to find a church. The nearest church to where she lived was Anglo-Catholic but this was not an approach she was comfortable with:

I was brought up in church which in those days was called Rite B, so it was not happy-clappy, it was middle of the road, wasn't high church, definitely wasn't low church, it was a middle of the road church which I was very comfortable in the worship there.

The style of service was important to this interviewee. They described how they: 'went into a church and looked at first of all at the service book to see what the service book was going to be.' The approach of Lent prompted a wider search:

And so I looked around and I suppose you get a little bit into a habit of not going to church so for a few weeks I probably didn't go to church and then it came to Lent and I thought, well I can't not go to a church during Lent... so I looked a little bit further afield and found St Mary's in Willesden.<sup>407</sup>

It was the more traditional approach of St Mary's that drew this interviewee in eventually. As with the previous interviewee, this person preferred a less evangelical approach. They spoke about feeling comfortable with the particular liturgical style and feeling welcomed into the congregation. The emotion that the church evoked was an important part of the search to find a place to worship. However, their situation was also complicated by the fact they were not so comfortable with some of the Anglo-Catholic aspects of worship at the church. Nevertheless, they were able to overcome these reservations as there were enough other facets of the church that made them feel happy to worship there. It seems that the absence of any evangelical style worship was more important than the presence of Anglo-Catholic elements. Not surprisingly the black Madonna had no bearing whatsoever in this person choosing St Mary's. What is interesting here is to contrast her choosing a church that is very traditional, and yet has a black Madonna, which is not something one would traditionally find in an Anglican church. Once again, I would suggest this disputes previous assumptions regarding the place of the black Madonna as somehow representing a challenge to tradition within a church. What has become apparent so far from both interviews and observations within St Mary's is that the situation is more complex than perhaps some previous research would suggest.

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<sup>407</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.

Another interviewee had come from abroad to live in London. At home in Africa, she had been brought up in the Anglican faith as this was compulsory in school. She explained that worship in Africa had been more ‘vibrant’ and they particularly liked the hymns and singing. Worship in England was more ‘solemn’ in comparison. However, sermons in Africa were very long and as a child this was sometimes hard to cope with and she had sometimes fallen asleep.<sup>408</sup>

Once she had come to England, it was the interviewee rather than her family who had wanted to continue attending church and they had insisted on going. The church back in Africa had been a social event as well as a religious one, so the fact that she had found this in London also was central to their experiences:

Over there in Africa the singing is very, very welcome. Same element, the social aspect of the church is more the same, very, very sociable. So that is how I remember it back as a young child; that is how I remember it, very, very social. Here it is too – it is social which I love.

She had initially had attended another church in the local area but then her children had begun to go to the primary school at St Mary’s. Her previous church:

was social but not as much as St Mary's offers. The social element there is just wonderful. It makes you feel like to go back into church and play a part. You want to be a part of the church, so that is how I feel personally. Here too on some occasion I feel it too, to be honest but depending on the occasion. I don't know...

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<sup>408</sup> Quote from taped interview, July 2010.

sometimes it is just so wonderful when you walk in that church, the stillness  
sometimes is just beautiful. It is wonderful.<sup>409</sup>

Orsi's work has demonstrated the centrality of religious experience for migrants. For those moving across borders, religion is important in that it helps people maintain ties to where they have come from, whilst at the same time being able to find ways of establishing themselves in their new place of residence.<sup>410</sup> Whilst she does not specifically address issues of migration in her work on Our Lady of Guadalupe, Rodriguez acknowledges that an individual's experience, including religious experience, is 'shaped by culture, history and economics.'<sup>411</sup> As the interviewee above mentioned, there were difficulties when arriving in this country. The differences in approaches to church in Africa and England were marked, and they missed the vibrancy and hymn of the church in which they were raised. Nevertheless, they had found worship which was recognisable to them and familiar enough to feel at ease. They showed that remaining within a religious tradition, while crossing continents, is not an easy transition.

Another member of the congregation, who originally came from the Caribbean, enjoyed the social activities at the church. They explained that they did not have close family in the United Kingdom. St Mary's 'therefore provides a bond as a substitute family. Had I not attended church there would not be much contact with anyone other than at work during the week.' Even though they no longer lived in the area, they continued to worship there as 'St Mary's is a place where I am able to quietly reflect and praise the Lord.'<sup>412</sup> Orsi argues that stories such as the ones above demonstrate that:

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<sup>409</sup> Quotes taken from taped interview, July 2010.

<sup>410</sup> See for example his examination of the Italian Catholic experience in America in Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1959.

<sup>411</sup> Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women.p.xxvii

<sup>412</sup> Quotes taken from written reflection, December 2010

relational ties structure religious practice and experience in a global context.

Immigrants and migrants establish connections between heaven and earth that stretch as well between one environment and another among families, friends, teachers, and others around the world, in their new homes and in the ones they left. Networks of connections between heaven and earth map the globe.<sup>413</sup>

The above examples from interviewees further validate the argument that black Madonna shrines to be considered on an individual basis. These are individual stories of attending a local church that happens to have a black Madonna. If one adopted a more general approach one would miss these stories. It could be argued that as these stories do not include mention of the black Madonna, then there should not be of interest to this field of study but I would argue that we need to look at the totality of what goes on at a shrine. I am not claiming that the data from my fieldwork at St Mary's in any way provides a complete picture of what goes on there but if one was to simply stop at the description of the shrine as given by Ean Begg related in chapter four, then we do not get a fuller depiction of what goes on in that shrine now.

## **Spirituality & Materiality**

In the previous section, interviewees mentioned their feelings when they were searching for a church to worship in: how comfortable or welcome they felt, or how the particular liturgy made them feel, was central to their experiences. The following sections explore the place of bodies and emotion in worship at St Mary's in more detail. People's religious practices involved their bodies and emotions in multiple ways. People described

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<sup>413</sup> Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them. pp.2-3



how certain church services had made them feel. Others talked of praying, which was coupled with the emotions experienced during the prayers; some of the importance of music and singing. The existence of the holy well meant healing was also a concern to some. The emotional support offered by others in times of crisis was also noted. In this section, for clarity I have separated these experiences and practices into separate themes but this is not to suggest that there is no overlap between categories.

### **Faith and Emotion**

The power of both prayer and emotions it invoked were described vividly by one interviewee. He acknowledged that it was not always easy or even possible to maintain high levels of involvement with worship. He said at times like that they were ‘sort of rolling through a desert going to church each Sunday; still going to church but not quite sure where I’m going, where I’ve been.’ In contrast to these periods he also experienced periods of immense clarity, or as he described them ‘revelatory experiences’, with regards to his faith. What was interesting about some of experiences he talked about was the way in which these were either facilitated by another person, or by other outside influences. These were very much relational experiences. For example, he talked about a day ‘of utter simplicity and perfection in learning how we can improve our prayer life’ which they took part in at Westminster Abbey. Just remembering this experience to tell me about it made the interviewee ‘fill up with emotion when I talk about him.’<sup>414</sup> The interviewee portrayed this day as a powerful, dynamic experience:

I had the most exalted prayer session I’ve had in my life. I’ve never experienced anything like it before or since and that was an amazing experience, and what I do

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<sup>414</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

observe is that you may go through the whole of your life with only a few true gems of experience.

Although the interviewee valued such a moving occurrence, he pointed out that faith was not just about those more powerful events: 'if you have those they're great, but it's the ability to go on without them and to still believe is a fundamental of my faith and the way in which I express myself.' The second important event was: 'standing and carrying the processional cross in St Paul's Cathedral at the Mothers Union corporate service for the whole of London and the South East' and this 'was an amazing experience.' Here it was the physical encounter with the cross that evoked the memory and emotion of a 'vivid experience':

I can recall almost every detail of that in my mind in my mind's eye... I've got a pictorial memory and I can pull out any incident that triggers it, and I've got a vivid colour picture of that experience and I can hear voices - not voices, but I can hear, as it were, the underlying sounds of that experience.'

What is also worth noting here is that the interviewee related these events to other aspects of their faith. Just as these experiences were 'vibrant and alive so to me [is] the life of Christ.' The interviewee was able to connect their own experiences to their relationship with Christ. In this instance, memory, emotion, bodily experience and faith are all linked together.<sup>415</sup>

Another interviewee talked of the emotional connections between themselves, other parishioners and the church. When she felt particularly low, this interviewee knew she

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<sup>415</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009.

could find what she emotionally needed: ‘Sometimes I just feel weak and don’t know what to do and when I go into church I just feel my strength come back to me, it’s just wonderful... that’s how I can describe it.’ She then related another story in which a friend experienced the presence of the sacred in church during a funeral service:

The Holy Spirit within the church is just beautiful. I give you another example. It was during the funeral service. During this funeral service, I was sitting next to her after the service; she said, ‘Did you see what just happened within the church? And I said no, what happened? She said, ‘You didn’t see it? And I said ‘no, I didn’t see nothing’, ‘When the sun shone through the glass window that sun was right at the coffin, it didn’t go anywhere else, you didn’t see that?’ I said ‘no’, but she saw it, isn’t that wonderful? The Holy Spirit is present, even at a funeral is present. Isn’t that wonderful, she said ‘doesn’t anybody see it?’ I said ‘no.’ She said, ‘I saw it the sun shone through and it just stopped at the coffin – isn’t that amazing?’

This example shows how people encounter sacred power in their everyday lives. The sense that the sacred is present and in this instance not just a feeling but visibly manifesting itself can be considered a formidable experience. This interviewee also talked about the use of the holy well and ‘its healing’ water and how the use of the water had had an effect on her:

It was the Easter vigil, I think that was the Easter Vigil, 8pm, the Easter Vigil I was present there. He (the priest) blessed us, blessed everyone with the holy water and I just had this sudden feeling that somebody, something that was

holding me just released, just left my body, it was a wonderful feeling and I said 'Ooh, what's happening to me?'

The feelings the water invoked strengthened the bond this person felt with the church:

You know it is a spiritual healing too, that is something that I have experienced that is really wonderful, so that's the church for me. I will always – my plans – my seed has been planted at St Mary's and that it will stay and grow, only God knows.

She had given the water to her husband when he was ill: 'I gave him the water and he said to me, "it's good, but I know it gives you clear eyesight as well as give you vision."' When I asked about what this might have meant – that the water gave you vision – she explained that it was more than just physical healing, but a spiritual healing as well. She told how her husband had felt when using the water: 'My husband said, "gosh when I wash my face with this water, I can see so many things, vision is just so clear" and then he said "I don't want to see so many visions" (laughs) so he stopped using it, but that was his choice.'<sup>416</sup> I wondered just what it was her husband had seen in his visions that made him want to stop using the water which he had felt was healing him. The interviewee did not say whether the particular illness he was suffering from at the time had anything to do with his death.

As the likes of Begg<sup>417</sup> have shown, black Madonna shrines are often associated with healings. It could be suggested therefore that the experiences described by the interviewee above fit into the existing narratives of black Madonnas. I would argue that

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<sup>416</sup> Quotes taken from taped interview, July 2010.

<sup>417</sup> Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin.

the story related by the interviewee shows that religious experiences and the emotions or feelings they invoke, even when the intention behind it is positive, may be ambivalent for those involved. Such ambivalences are not recounted in the existing stories of black Madonnas. By not including the voices of worshippers, the complexities of events such as healing may be missed.

Matters surrounding death, mourning and memory of loved ones arose in other situations during my fieldwork. During both Sunday and mid-week services prayers were said to remember both those who had died and those who were ill. If someone wanted a prayer said for anyone in particular, they would write it on the piece of paper provided on the notice board. People would often write the same names week after week to have prayers said. One person who did this for a sick relative each week said their relative knew they did this. Their relative was grateful as the prayers kept them going.

The church also commemorated Remembrance Day in November. The Remembrance Service included two minutes' silence, during which the Union Jack flag was lowered. A very frail, elderly gentleman laid a wreath of poppies on one of the memorial plaques within the church. The national anthem was sung as part of the church service on this particular occasion. In 2009, Remembrance Day was celebrated with the unveiling of the new war memorial in the churchyard on 11<sup>th</sup> November. That day was Armistice Day, and there was a special service as the council has given St Mary's a new war memorial.

These above examples reveal the different ways in which religion intersects with people's experiences of death. In some instances, such as the prayer notices or the Remembrance Day services, these are 'official' ways in which the church becomes involved. It has been pointed out that even in largely secular societies such as the United

Kingdom, there is still an expectation that churches will be involved in rituals marking death and that 'A refusal to offer either a funeral liturgy or appropriate pastoral care would violate deeply held assumptions.'<sup>418</sup> Those 'official' systems go beyond providing services and care for individuals. With the Remembrance Day Service, religion connects with wider national concerns. The place of the Church of England as the state religion is demonstrated by the use of the Union Jack and the singing of the national anthem. I would suggest that, as with the promotion of a shared history of St Mary's, services of national remembrance serve to strengthen the shared identity of the congregation, who as has been demonstrated, come from different parts of the globe.

At the beginning of this chapter I pointed out how the black Madonna was placed within the popular or non-official religious practices, at odds with official church practices. I suggested the situation at St Mary's is more complicated. There is overlap between 'official' and 'unofficial' ways of marking events. It is not the case that people either choose one way or another. Rather it is a blending of these different ways, and both produce strong emotional reactions. Recognising this blending of the official and non-official is what lies behind the use of lived religion as a means of examining religious experience.

### **Music, Food and Lived Religion**

Music and singing are part of worship at St Mary's. Such activities can be seen as personal expressions of faith but also reflect the style of worship in the church. The Sacred Harp singing group meet to rehearse and there is a small choir who sing during the Sunday Service. The Sunday school children and youth groups also sing. The service

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<sup>418</sup> See for example Grace Davie, "Vicarious Religion: Methodological Challenges," Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).p.23.

on Sundays is a sung service, where the Lord's Prayer and the Agnus Dei are sung. The tunes to which these are sung vary throughout the liturgical year with more solemn tunes used during Lent. McGuire argues: 'Embodied practices such as singing, tap emotions and memories. Collective embodied practices such as singing and dancing together can produce an experiential sense of community and connectedness. Embodied practices, including mundane and seemingly unexceptional activities like singing and preparing a meal, link individuals' materiality as humans and their spirituality.'<sup>419</sup>

On the mid-week Wednesday service that is attended by fewer people, there is no organ or piano and the congregation sings the hymn unaccompanied by any music. On Sundays, both the organ and the piano are used at various points during the service. In interviews and in less formal conversations, members of the congregation talked about singing and how this formed an important part of their worship and their life in the church; as one older member of the congregation said, she was always singing at home so it was lucky she lived alone. She had nothing to fear or worry as she had God which was why she sang.

For another, she said 'it wasn't the black Madonna that got me to Willesden but it was the music.' This interviewee continued: 'I knew I would like the style of music.'<sup>420</sup>

Another interviewee believed that singing and music was a vital part of connecting with the divine:

That's another way of expressing oneself, not everybody does it or can do it but those who can should and if they can they should do that to the utmost of their ability and with reverence and with a sense of purpose that the music is another

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<sup>419</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life. p.115.

<sup>420</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, April 2010.

part of the vehicle of the expression of our faith and makes it come alive in my mind.

But this was also a personal expression. The interviewee had been singing since childhood and the music in church brought back memories of the ‘past very vividly.’ Music was a way of connecting to emotions and to the divine. All these elements became inseparable parts of one person’s religion as lived:

music is still a vivid way of expressing my own personal inner beliefs in a more tangible form in the spoken word, or in the sung word and with music that actually can lift you to heavenwards if only you can feel it. I’m very fortunate that over the years I’ve been aware of it, I’m conscious of it. It enlivens me and I feel wonderful if we’ve had a really good service and music has been a part of it.<sup>421</sup>

Food and drink are also an important consideration in the study of lived religion. The preparation and serving of food can be ‘highly meaningful and spiritual practices.’<sup>422</sup> At St Mary’s, food and drink do play their part in the life of the church. Throughout the church’s social calendar there are events such as the harvest supper where people come together to celebrate over food and drink. During Pilgrimage Day, there is a shared lunch where everyone attending is encouraged to bring food that is placed on a table in the centre of the hall in order that everyone can share together. There is a sense that this sharing is central to the creation of a feeling of community amongst those taking part in the pilgrimage, whether a regular parishioner at St Mary’s or a whether there as a visitor who has come to take part in this particular event.

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<sup>421</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, November 2009

<sup>422</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life, p.106



There is also a link here between the symbolic food and drink of ritual (the bread and wine at the Eucharist) and the 'real' food and drink served at other, seemingly less sacred times. At Communion on Sundays, a real loaf of bread is used, rather than a Communion wafer. The links between the two have not gone unnoticed by the congregation. One member told me:

at Communion, the fact that we all stand you know and we all wait at the table until everyone has finished, a bit like family meals at home, you know; we always waited until everybody had finished and then, you know, we could go off and do whatever it was we wanted to do. And it's the same here (at church), that we all wait until the meal has finished and before we leave the table. Um... I don't know, I'm sure it doesn't matter to some people and they probably see other things that aren't as important to me but that bit, I just love that element of it.<sup>423</sup>

Adopting a lived religion approach to a black Madonna shrine reveals that there may be more everyday aspects to worship, such as the examples given above. This is in contrast to the emphasis on the extraordinary or mysterious aspects of black Madonna shrines as discussed in previous chapters. I would also suggest that the lack of any mention of the black Madonna by interviewees indicates that these aspects of the church would remain the same if there had not been a black Madonna.

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<sup>423</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

## Religious Tradition and Religious Expression

As mentioned above, in some previous examples of the literature, much has been made of the difference between popular religious expression and the religious practices encouraged and sanctioned by church hierarchies<sup>424</sup> but in the case of St Mary's, the picture is a complex one. Ammerman has argued that we must take these complexities into account if we are to fully understand the ways in which religion may operate in people's lives:

The relationship between human and divine is sometimes oriented toward meaning, sometimes toward belonging, sometimes toward desired rewards, sometimes toward communion (or relationship), sometimes toward ecstasy, and sometimes towards moral guidance. Attempts to explain religious actions that eliminate complexity, may explain nothing at all.<sup>425</sup>

On the surface, there appeared to be little conflict as to what was seen as acceptable by the church authorities and what was practiced by individuals. There were the main rituals conducted through the priests, on a daily basis such as the Eucharist, as well as those conducted less often such as pilgrimage or healing. Individuals did perform their own religious rituals, such as private prayers, using water from the holy well at home. These private rituals did not necessarily contradict any official teaching. I found that there was an interest amongst interviewees in official religious practices and traditions and these were frequently discussed. This does not mean people simply accepted the religious

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<sup>424</sup> See for example Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy.

<sup>425</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, "Studying Everyday Religion: Challenges for the Future," Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). p.227.

tradition they were part of without question. There was questioning of aspects of church teachings and not everyone was comfortable with all aspects of worship.

In particular, any aspects of what was perceived as Catholicism proved problematic.

During an interview with a group of older members of the congregation these issues were discussed at length. It was observed that the use of 'Father' as a title at St Mary's was a more recent development. This was seen as indicative of the church becoming more high church than it had been in the past. According to the interviewees, a previous priest had been instrumental in introducing some of the 'high' elements into St Mary's, some of which were not so welcome:

I2: And he brought a lot of this – a lovely guy and still is – but he brought a lot of the things that came nearer the Catholic side.

I1: Yeah, yeah...

I2: Things like the Angelus bell was never rung, but now it's the Angelus and Benediction and goodness knows what and oh, its... to me it's not right.

I3: And Communion wasn't every service

I1: No.

I3: No...

I2: It was only on Sundays.

I3: Or maybe the third Sunday of every month, or something like that.<sup>426</sup>

The word 'catholic' when used in the Creed caused some consternation:

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<sup>426</sup> Quotes from taped interview, July 2009.

I1: In our Creed it's got, you don't say it and I don't say it, I believe in one holy Catholic Church...

I4: We didn't say it this morning.

I2: I never will say it.

I4: We didn't say it this morning.

I3: I know when Dad came here once he said, 'no, that's not the Creed'. Most of it was but not all of it, it was slightly different...

I1: We don't say the Creed on Wednesday.

I3: Father David said there's a few ways of saying it, the Creed.

I1: We don't... don't say it on a Wednesday but it's still got 'I believe in the Catholic', you know.

I4: I thought it was 'we believe'?

I1: Well 'we believe', whatever...

I2: But you see I object to that, because how can you say 'we' when you are including me? What gives you the right to include *me* in what you're saying?

I1: Yeah, yeah...<sup>427</sup>

This discussion had arisen on a previous occasion after the service, when everyone was having tea and coffee. The priest explained that they were part of the 'Catholic', as in *universal*, church, but were not *Roman Catholic*. One of the interviewees above disagreed, saying he was not baptised a Catholic but into the Church of England. He said he didn't say that part of the Creed as he disagreed with it. Other churches in the area were identified as being much 'higher' and closer to Roman Catholicism. Several members of the congregation explained how another church in the area had become so high that it was beginning to resemble a Catholic church with lots of 'idols' and images;

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<sup>427</sup> Quotes from taped interview, July 2009.

apparently some members of this church had become upset by this. It was interesting that the members of the congregation in this discussion were sympathetic to the problems faced by the other church, and yet they, the parishioners at St Mary's, did not voice any objections to the black Madonna or other statues of Mary in their own church. Perhaps it was the familiarity of the history of the church and its black Madonna that made the images in their own church less objectionable. The problem in the other church appeared to be having idols and images imposed on them where there had not been any before. The changes to the church identified above were also noted by a different interviewee:

But it [the Hail Mary] wasn't part of the service when I first went there – I'm sure it wasn't. I could be wrong, but I don't recollect it being part of the service but certainly a lot of the 'smells and bells' bit wasn't there either in those days, not an everyday occasion. A lot of churches would normally have that for high days [only] so that wasn't there.

The interviewee described how difficult this was at first. There were certain elements of rituals she found especially challenging: 'And there are times – I couldn't even cross myself when I first went there, in fact that took a lot doing as that was something we didn't do in the Church of England either.'

She talked at length about why she began to cross herself and how she overcame her initial reluctance:

To begin with I started to cross myself when we had a Lent visit. He (the priest) divided the PCC up into two and they visited in the house and I was sitting where you are now and we were talking, and he said, 'well why don't you cross

yourself?’ and I said, ‘well I don't feel comfortable doing it.’ So he said, ‘why don't you do it for Lent as a Lenten discipline, try and do it for Lent?’ and I did, and I felt it wasn't all that bad and I wasn't being castigated for doing so.

A further understanding and interpretation of making the sign of the cross helped her in continuing the practice:

and couple of weeks ago we had a sermon in church and it started off by talking about the sign of the cross and how he described it as ‘I’ crossed out. And I thought that ‘I’ crossed out is a really good way of looking at it, because it means ‘I’ isn't important, and it was a really, really good way of sort of saying, apart from what the cross is, as to why you would actually do it, that you are not centre of your life – somebody else is who is actually far greater than you are. And I thought it was a really good way of describing how you actually do make the sign of the cross, so that was that.

The practice of crossing oneself, which was initially seen as something from another (i.e. Catholic) tradition, was given new meaning and therefore became an accepted part of her own religious practice. This shows that for this individual at least, it was possible to adapt to new practices and incorporate them into her existing ones. The changes brought about by this priest mentioned by the other interviewees were acknowledged this interviewee as well:

On his induction [he] more or less said straight away we're going to have a service every single day of the week ,which there wasn't at that time but he announced straight away in the notices that there would be a Mass said the

following day, and apart from the vicar's day off, there would be a Mass said every day. And he sort of took the church with him in some respects.<sup>428</sup>

She recognized that these changes may not have been easy for everyone to accept:

‘worship in the round, which to a sort of traditional church is very, very hard to come to terms with as you don't necessarily feel comfortable with doing that sort of thing.’ The introduction of worship in the round was a major change. This meant the pews were all removed, replaced by with chairs which were arranged in a circle, with a gap left for where the altar would be. This meant that services were to be conducted at this new altar, rather than at the more traditional high altar. Having the church set out in a circle changed the way Communion was received. Instead of going up to the altar and queuing in a line, the congregation stand in a circle. The priest and those who are helping serve Communion then walk around the inside of the circle. Therefore the priest would be much closer to the congregation, something this interviewee really appreciated:

but now I don't feel comfortable sitting in a pew. If you sit in a pew the vicar is so far away that you really have to look carefully to see what they're doing; they seem so distant from everybody else. I prefer it when we've got the service in the round on Sunday, when the vicar is there in the middle and the vicar is part and parcel of the whole worshipping community.<sup>429</sup>

The interviewee was correct in her assertion that such a change was difficult to accept. During an informal conversation at church, one parishioner who was not so keen on the round observed that ‘pews are more in keeping with an old church.’<sup>430</sup> She would have preferred to go to the high altar for Communion. Two other parishioners disagreed,

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<sup>428</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>429</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.

<sup>430</sup> Fieldwork notes 5<sup>th</sup> September 2009

saying that in Jesus' time there would have been no pews and people would have congregated around him in a circle. For those who did like worship in the round, it was what this style of worship stood for that made it so appealing. The symbolism of the congregation standing in a circle together was important:

I love St Mary's and so the fact we have other people coming to see it and you know we can show it off, that's great. And we are different, the fact that we're in the round and that, I mean I just think that, for me that speaks volumes. Um, you know that at the offertory it's... it isn't just our money and you know, and the bread and wine that we're offering, we all come forward, it's us, it's our lives that we're putting on the plate, you know, and I think that that really speaks volumes.<sup>431</sup>

Having the church set up in this way meant: 'the Last Supper being closer and closer in the form of your worship. So it really is the Last Supper when the Eucharist is taken' – making this this 'a seemly and most especially spiritual way to worship,' with a 'mixture of warmth and spontaneity and that spirituality.'<sup>432</sup>

Although changes in the way worship was conducted could be challenging, one interviewee recognised that change had long been part of the Anglican tradition. Having read and thought about church history she commented:

I don't know how we've survived when you read back, you know. All the trends and changes. That everybody received Communion, nobody received Communion, except the priest; that statues were in, statues were out; that chalices

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<sup>431</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>432</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.



and everything were wonderful rich ornaments then they were out and people were just using what you might call just a beer flagon; and all the changes. I just think for your average person in the pew, and I don't profess to understand all the politics of the bishops and you know they make the decisions and you either like or you don't like it but we've gone through eras where if that was me I'd be wanting to say, "for crying out loud just make your mind up what you want me to do!" (laughter), you know? Because the changes we've gone through... and what goes around comes around I'm sure, but now we have such broad spectrum and that has been a major change.

She pointed out that this change over the centuries had meant the Church of England was much broader in spectrum than the Roman Catholic Church:

I think that is one of our strengths, but it may also be one of the things that will eventually destroy us, or at least divide us. And quite what will happen in the not too distant future, what will happen, who can tell. With things like that can work either way really, can't they?<sup>433</sup>

But to be able to be part of such a broad tradition gave people more choices in how they may wish to worship. She suggested that through the course of a person's religious life, they might want something different. Their religious practice was not necessarily a static thing:

you can either find somewhere happy clappy if that's what suits you, or you can find somewhere where they're never off their knees and nobody looks at you if

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<sup>433</sup> Quote taken from interview, April 2010.

that's what suits you. And from time to time it's good to know where these places are, because from time to time you might want one end or the other just because it's something different, and that's great if you know where to find it. I think that's one of the benefits of the Church of England, and hopefully you'll be made to feel welcome even if you're not staying and joining the choir (laughs).<sup>434</sup>

In this final section of this chapter I have tried to show how those who worship at St Mary's keenly connect with religion. Not all aspects of the way Christianity was practiced at the church was accepted unquestioningly and worshippers were quite vocal in this questioning. Some of the Anglo-Catholic aspects were difficult for people to accept, although as the interviewee who did begin to cross herself shows, people could adapt and change their practices. I would argue that these discussions have shown the value of including the voices of worshippers as they show the depth of the experiences at a black Madonna shrine, regardless of how significant the actual image of the black Madonna might be.

## **Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to look at the various ways in which members of the congregation at St Mary's experienced religion. The chapter began by hearing stories as to how people came to worship at St Mary's. It then moved on to consider the ways in which spirituality is affected by materiality – in other words, how people's bodies and emotions are involved in religious experience. This section included a wide range of experiences such as prayer, healing and ritual, but also seemingly more mundane activities such as singing. I chose to include such a wide range of activities because they

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<sup>434</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, April 2010

help to demonstrate how using the frame of lived religion broadens the scope of research into people's religious lives. As Orsi writes:

Religion cannot be neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life. Nor can religion be separated from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behaviour arise and to which they respond. Religion is not only not *sui generis*, distinct from other dimensions of experience called "profane". Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life.<sup>435</sup>

People spoke of profound religious experiences. They spoke of their spiritual journeys, their difficulties with some aspects of their faith, and the healing that they and their loved ones had gained from prayer at the shrine. However, the way people speak is not divided into neat categories, with the sacred aspects on one hand and the profane on the other. Rather, there is a merging together of both sacred and profane experiences. This section of the chapter also considered the importance of both official and non-official ways in which people marked death and remembrance.

The last section of the chapter considered the complex ways in which people acted within and experienced their religious tradition, noting that this was not straightforward and that people had thought deeply about theological and liturgical concerns. Looking at theology and liturgy may seem to be a departure from a lived religion approach. But this does not mean we have to adopt a theological approach to look at these issues. Orsi encourages scholars to take into account what he describes as the 'presence' of the sacred and divine

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<sup>435</sup> Robert A. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1997), p.7.

and to consider the relationships people have with these.<sup>436</sup> This quote from a parishioner at St Mary's is an excellent example of how one individual talked about this presence:

sometimes I think to myself, I wish it was easier to show God to people. You know, I could tell my friends I've met with you and no-one will have any difficulty believing that even if they've never met you, you know, they'll just take it for granted you know. But to say to them God is alive and a real person... so many people can't take that on board. I don't what you can do to make Jesus a reality; I guess if it were easy it would've been done a long time ago, you know but the fact there's been a lot of very devout people to whom God has been more than about what I do on a Sunday morning, he's been a big reality in their lives.<sup>437</sup>

Although the black Madonna has been largely missing in these discussions, as suggested above, revealing the debates and questions worshippers have is important for this research because it illustrates how much thought people give to their faith. These considerations do not appear to be especially important in the existing literature, where the emphasis is on the power of black Madonna, rather than on what worshippers might actually be doing and saying. It can be argued that to compare St Mary's with other shrines is misleading as St Mary's is an Anglican rather than a Roman Catholic shrine. But as I have pointed out in the introduction to this research, part of the problem has been the grand narrative approaches of previous research. It is precisely the differences of St Mary's that make it a worthwhile focus for examination.

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<sup>436</sup> See for example Robert A. Orsi, "Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity," Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World, ed. Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).

<sup>437</sup> Quote taken from taped interview, April 2010.

## Chapter Seven - 'We're all on that same journey' – Experiencing Pilgrimage

This chapter concentrates on the place of pilgrimage at St Mary's church. Examining the pilgrimage at St Mary's in the context of this research this chapter builds on aspects from the previous three chapters, blending together elements of history, Marian devotion and religious experience. As with other aspects of this research at St Mary's, the purpose here is to demonstrate how a particular shrine functions. In the previous chapters, it was noted how the black Madonna of St Mary's is not always present in the rituals or worship at the church. One of the aims of this chapter is to examine whether this is any different at pilgrimage, where the focus is on St Mary's place as a shrine, rather than just a parish church. Whereas the national Anglican shrine and pilgrimage at Walsingham has been the subject of previous research, the smaller, local Anglican shrine at St Mary's has not.

In chapter four when discussing the history of St Mary's, it was argued that the re-telling and re-using of history is a means of authenticating current practices at the church and a means by which the congregation can develop an identity. The reinstitution of pilgrimage, I would argue, is illustrative of this use of history. But as this chapter shows, this is a pilgrimage that draws on history but does not simply re-enact it. There are secular constraints and concerns that affect the way the pilgrimage is reconstructed and reinvented.

In their introduction to the collection: *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*,<sup>438</sup> Anna-Karina Hermkens *et al* suggest that Mary 'moves' on several different levels. Pilgrims move to and from the site of pilgrimage and the pilgrimage itself involves physical movement of different kinds such as processing, kneeling and

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<sup>438</sup> Hermkens, "Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage."

praying. Physical movement at pilgrimage can then bring about ‘movement on a second, emotive level. These include emotional transformations and healings, as well as all kinds of feelings of connectedness when experiencing Mary’s presence’. Then there is ‘Mary’s own movement’ whereby ‘statues and icons dedicated to her leave the church or sanctuary to visit her devotees in the streets, at home or in their families.’

The aspects of pilgrimage raised by Hermkens *et al* have resonance with pilgrimage at St Mary’s church. By walking in the streets around the church as part of the pilgrimage celebrations, participants are performing their faith and expressing their Christian identity in a public space. On their walk, pilgrims walk with an image of Mary, so she travels the pilgrimage route with them and they, in turn, are ‘moved by Mary’ in the emotional experience of pilgrimage. This movement serves to reinforce the notion that pilgrimage is an embodied practice. In the case of St Mary’s, this does not just include the walking but also praying, healing, singing and eating. All of these activities are part of the experience. In the chapter four, it was suggested that such embodied practices also connect with history and memory. This is pertinent to this chapter also whereby the congregation feel that the pilgrimage of the present connects them to the pilgrimage of the past.

As described in chapter four, St Mary’s had been a centre for pilgrimage in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and this ended during the Reformation in 1538. Pilgrimage at St Mary’s was re-introduced in July 1971. This re-introduction of pilgrimage was seen as part of ‘a renewal of devotion’<sup>439</sup> at St Mary’s, which included the introduction of the new black Madonna statue, placed in the church the following year. The 1971 Pilgrimage Day – described by the parish magazine at the time as ‘the greatest event in our Church for

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<sup>439</sup> Vail, *Shrines of Our Lady in England*, p.226.

years' – was to take place on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> July, with several different events to mark the occasion. The day was to start with an open-air Communion 'taken by the Bishop and assisted by Archdeacon and all the rural deans.' Then there was to be a procession 'all round the church grounds and down towards the railway.' A flower festival was to be held in the church, including displays from all the parishes in Brent. In the early evening there would then be a short service of dismissal with music afterwards.<sup>440</sup>

Pilgrimage Day remains a central event in the church's calendar where regular members of the congregation are joined by pilgrims from other local churches as part of the celebrations, although some aspects have changed over the years. The route in particular has been subject to change. As the pilgrimage went down the middle of the road, the police had to provide an escort and according to information given by parishioners, this became difficult to organise in recent years. In the past, the large statue of the black Madonna was included in the procession. The statue was fixed to a trolley and wheeled around. This was deemed to be unsafe and now a small icon of the Virgin Mary is carried at the front of the procession.

The month of pilgrimage was changed from July to May during the period I was attending. In the past it had always been the July date as there was a whole festival weekend with a Summer Fayre, grand draw and BBQ and flower festival. It was explained that May was traditionally Mary's month so it was more appropriate to hold the pilgrimage then. So it now takes place on the last weekend in May. In the years in which I have been researching St Mary's, there has been no open-air Communion. The flower festival continued on and off, although once again, this did not happen in the years I attended pilgrimage.

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<sup>440</sup> Willesden Parish Magazine, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1971.

The chapter begins with a brief exploration of some of the issues that have been raised in the scholarship of pilgrimage.<sup>441</sup> The chapter then moves on to describe the sequence of events during a pilgrimage day and considers the importance of pilgrimage for members of the congregation. It then discusses the points of conflict, or contestation that have occurred during the pilgrimage. The last section of the chapter looks at the Marian symbolism associated with the pilgrimage. The observations included in this chapter come from the pilgrimage that took place on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

### **Approaches to pilgrimage**

The field of pilgrimage studies has been dominated by both the concept of *communitas* as posited by Victor and Edith Turner, and the more recent challenges to this concept by the likes of Eade and Sallnow.<sup>442</sup> In the Turnerian model, *communitas* represented a universal feeling of ‘full unmediated communication, even communion,’ which arose ‘spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations and circumstances.’ *Communitas* consisted of bonds that were ‘undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, extant, non-rational, existential’ and was comprised of ‘universalism and openness.’<sup>443</sup> Pilgrimage represented a special event that lay outside of the usual, everyday lives of those who take part, in which all participants became an egalitarian, homogenous mass, all attending with similar purpose:

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<sup>441</sup> For a more detailed exploration of this debate and other explanations of pilgrimage see John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). John Eade, "Introduction to the Illinois Paperback," Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage, ed. John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Hermkens, "Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage."

<sup>442</sup> See Eade, "Introduction to the Illinois Paperback."

<sup>443</sup> Victor and Edith Turner, Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). pp.250-251.



At the pilgrimage's end – at Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Knock, for example – the pilgrim may find himself a member of a vast throng. But this is a throng of similar, not of structurally independent persons. It is only through the power ascribed by all to ritual, particularly to the Eucharistic ritual (which in part commemorates the pilgrim saint), that likeness of lot and intention, is converted into “communitas”.<sup>444</sup>

In *Contesting The Sacred*, Eade and Sallnow provide an overview of this debate including the criticisms aimed at the Turners' work on pilgrimage and the shift in the debate towards seeing pilgrimage as a site of contestation rather than communitas.<sup>445</sup> They argue that the Turners vastly overestimated the extent of communitas:

It is the determinism of the model which limits its usefulness, for the necessary alignment of pilgrimage and anti-structure not only prejudices the complex character of the phenomenon but also imposes a spurious homogeneity on the practice of pilgrimage in widely differing historical and cultural settings.<sup>446</sup>

Eade and Sallnow suggest there are several ‘modes’ where the ‘sacred centre’ within pilgrimage may be located, that of ‘person, place and text’:

The sacred centre, then, can assume many different forms. The thrust of our analytic endeavour should be not towards the formulation of ever more inclusive, and consequently ever more vacuous, generalizations, but instead towards the examination of the specific peculiarities of its construction in the first instance.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*.p.13.

<sup>445</sup> Eade and Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*.

<sup>446</sup> Eade and Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. p.5.

<sup>447</sup> Eade and Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. p.9.

However, in a new introduction, Eade admits that the view of pilgrimage as contested was perhaps overstated, as all social practices may be said to be equally contested.<sup>448</sup>

More recently, Coleman and Eade point out that previous studies on pilgrimage – even if they attempt to challenge the Turnerian argument of pilgrimage, have emphasised the ‘special’ and specific nature of pilgrimage: ‘that such travel could somehow (or at least should ideally) be divorced from everyday social, political and cultural processes.’<sup>449</sup>

Coleman and Eade therefore question whether pilgrimage needs to be seen as exceptional at all. Drawing on other studies<sup>450</sup>, they demonstrate that pilgrimage: ‘can indeed provide a release from the everyday, but is also a recurring event, building up local memories and putting down strong roots in local networks of cooperation and competition’<sup>451</sup>. In this respect, Coleman and Eade’s characterisation of pilgrimage is a challenge to the Turnerian paradigm which ‘tends to assume that pilgrimage involves a distant, one-off journey rather than a more routine, regularized activity’.<sup>452</sup>

Coleman points out that, ‘neither *communitas* nor contestation should themselves become fetishized in order to produce neatly symmetrical anthropological theory, made up of views that appear to constitute a simple binary opposition’.<sup>453</sup> Coleman also suggests that trying to define precisely what pilgrimage ‘is’ may be unhelpful:

I am not convinced that the content of any single definition matters very much. I mean here that we should always be made aware of what a given author thinks that he or she is talking about, but should not assume that over time we shall

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<sup>448</sup> Eade, "Introduction to the Illinois Paperback." p.xiv.

<sup>449</sup> Simon Coleman and John Eade, "Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage," Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion, ed. Simon Coleman and John Eade (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). p.3.

<sup>450</sup> See Coleman and Eade, "Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage." pp.12-13 for references.

<sup>451</sup> Coleman and Eade, "Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage." p.13.

<sup>452</sup> Coleman and Eade, "Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage." p.13.

<sup>453</sup> Simon Coleman, "Do You Believe in Pilgrimage? *Communitas*, Contestation and Beyond," Anthropological Theory 2.3 (2002). p.361.

collectively achieve an ever more precise and universally applicable set of criteria with which finally to pin down 'the' activity of pilgrim.<sup>454</sup>

The evidence from St Mary's presented in this chapter would suggest that on the surface the pilgrimage there did not fit easily into either the 'communitas' or 'contestation' views of pilgrimage. Instead the initial picture presented by St Mary's is one with both of these being represented. People did express feelings towards the church and the pilgrimage that could be described as *communitas*. However, caution needs to be exercised here. Whilst I am not suggesting I was misled in anyway by the feelings revealed in interviewees, I am aware that people may not have felt entirely comfortable with expressing any reservations they may have had about aspects of the pilgrimage.

There were more overt points of contestation present: in how some members of the congregation felt about the pilgrimage and some of the devotions associated with it; around the holy well in the church with local historians and indeed a member of the congregation challenging the veracity of the claims made for this and contestation from outside of the church. Other denominations of protestant Christians protested outside the church against what they perceived as idolatry.

Whilst Coleman and Eade's challenges to the category of pilgrimage have been useful, I would also agree with Jill Dubisch<sup>455</sup> that perhaps we should not abandon the term *pilgrimage* completely. For the purposes of this research, the term pilgrimage is used because that is the word the congregation of St Mary's use themselves. I have found Dubisch's definition of pilgrimage helpful to try and understand how this term may be used to explain the events at St Mary's. She writes that pilgrimage is: '(1) the association

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<sup>454</sup> Coleman, "Do You Believe in Pilgrimage? Communitas, Contestation and Beyond." p.362.

<sup>455</sup> Dubisch, In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine. p.46.

created within a particular religious tradition of certain events and/or sacred figures with a particular field of space, and (2) the notion that the material world can make manifest the invisible spiritual world at such places.<sup>456</sup>

Drawing on Dubisch's definition, I would illustrate the different elements of pilgrimage in my research in the following ways: the religious tradition in question is Anglicanism and the events and sacred figures are the annual Pilgrimage Day at St Mary's church, which is Marian pilgrimage. Although the Virgin Mary is seemingly the main sacred figure, this chapter will show that there remains a strong Christological element to this particular pilgrimage. The material world concerned would be the geographical location of the church itself, Willesden in north west London; the physical space of the church, its shrine and the grounds surrounding it, and the various material depictions of the Virgin Mary within the church, including the statue of the Black Madonna. Within this particular material space, pilgrims have their religious experiences. It is in this context of pilgrimage – as localised and rooted in the everyday – that pilgrimage at St Mary's will be considered.

### **‘Just go and experience it’ – The place of pilgrimage at St Mary's**

Pilgrimage at St Mary's began with Mass in the church at midday. After Mass there was a lunch in the Parish Centre. Everyone had brought some food and it was placed on a large central table to share. The atmosphere was lively and friendly. At 2pm the church was opened again for those who wanted to offer their own private prayers, the quiet, contemplative space offered in the church contrasting with that of the shared lunch. After lunch we returned to the church to get ready for the pilgrimage walk. Everyone was given balloons to hold and these would be released at the end. Balloons – seemingly non-

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<sup>456</sup> Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine*, p.38.

religious objects – were invested with significance as they were incorporated into the celebrations. Blue and white balloons (the colours associated with the Virgin Mary) filled the church and were carried by pilgrims as they walked the pilgrimage route. Attached to each balloon was a label which participants were encouraged to write their name on and a message saying that to whoever found the balloon to know that (BLANK) was praying for them.

For the pilgrimage procession, we went around the back of the church grounds, down the lane, past the playing fields and through the housing estate and then looped round the back into the main road and back to the church. As we walked we sang hymns about Mary and an icon of the Virgin was carried at the front of the procession. The church wardens acted as stewards to help people along the route. As we walked through the estate, residents who were sitting out in the sunshine watched us smiling. Walking through the estate during pilgrimage has been identified as a significant act. In an interview conducted in *The Tablet* in 2009, the then vicar of St Mary's commented that the pilgrimage which takes a route through Church End Estate, described as 'murder capital of London', was 'part of our reaching out.'<sup>457</sup> Orsi suggests that: 'The streets are not simple places, then. If they were, there would be no need to take the gods out into them.'<sup>458</sup> Taking the pilgrimage through the estate, with the image of the Virgin Mary, in this way can be seen almost as an act of sanctification, a cleansing of an area defined by acts of defilement.

Walking along the main road, we were tooted by passing cars – although whether this was in support or derision was impossible to ascertain. Back in the churchyard we let the

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<sup>457</sup> Richard Abbott, "A Tale of Two Shrines," *The Tablet* 22nd August 2009. p.8.

<sup>458</sup> Robert A. Orsi, "Introduction: Crossing the City Line," *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999). p.49.

balloons go to a round of applause from all present. We then returned to the church for the final part of the pilgrimage. This comprised Benediction, shrine prayers and the sprinkling of the water from the church spring. Everyone queues up to be sprinkled either from the font or from the fountain where the water directly comes up.

Orsi describes 'urban religious cartographies' or 'maps of being' as the mental maps and networks of particular religious and social worlds which people create for themselves to negotiate their ways around a city: 'Religious cartographies disclose the coordinates of alternative worlds for practitioners, remaking the meanings of ordinary places and signalling the locations of extraordinary ones, establishing connections between humans and invisible sacred companions of all sorts.'<sup>459</sup> I would argue that the pilgrimage at St Mary's functions as just such a map of being.

The networks that pilgrimage has created stretch back into the past, connecting participants to the church's history. It was observed by one interviewee that she considered pilgrimage to be a literal and metaphorical journey for Christians. To take part in pilgrimage was to take part in the journey that all Christians had taken throughout the centuries:

It's like there was a picture that I saw in Walsingham that started off with an image of Mary, and then it had medieval pilgrims gathered around this image which was obviously when it came into being and it went along the picture... the pilgrims were getting more and more modern looking as it went through the history and the ages. And I thought, 'Well yeah, we are, we're all following, we're all on that same journey, and now it's our turn' And you know behind us

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<sup>459</sup> Orsi, "Introduction: Crossing the City Line." pp.51-54.

there's a whole load and I can't imagine... I look at some of the fashions, I think "heavens above!", but I'm sure you know when I was a youngster, people of my age then were looking at me and thinking "good lord!", so I guess who knows what they'll be wearing in 20, 50, 100 years time but we'll all be part of that long chain of pilgrims... and that's just mind blowing really, it's hard to get your head round really coz you can only do what you're doing now, and hope that with the next generation coming up there's enough seed being sown. I mean God won't let it dry up now; if he didn't want us to be Christians he would have stopped it long ago I'm sure, but it is amazing really.<sup>460</sup>

These networks also include the other churches who take part in the celebrations. The use of the balloons with their prayer messages attached would also be included in this in network. Not only were the balloons used as a marker of participation during the pilgrimage procession carried by participants but by letting them go, to be found by others, the network is further extended. Pilgrimage at St Mary's was seen by participants as a demonstration of Christian faith. It connected Christians to one another on the pilgrimage and it was an act of Christian faith in public:

I attend (pilgrimage) sometimes; I feel it has been uplifting and solemn. The friendly atmosphere created by receiving other churches. Shared lunch shows the generosity of members of St Mary's. Moving through the community enables others to witness the dedication and seriousness of Christians. Pilgrimage can be a means of drawing others to the Christian faith. Pilgrimage provides me with the opportunity to reflect deeply on myself and to think of the reason for worshipping as a Christian.<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Quote from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>461</sup> Written reflection, December 2009.

The notion of specialness at St Mary's, introduced in an earlier chapter, was attributed in part to the pilgrimage. It was recognised that pilgrimage made St Mary's stand out from other local churches. But rather than alienating them, it was a means by which the church could reach out to others and include them in the celebrations:

I think if for some reason we didn't have it the church would still carry on, but I think we would lose, we would certainly lose something. Most churches – unless you've got a wedding or a baptism you're inviting everyone to – most churches don't have the opportunity to invite other people in to do things.

I suppose our pilgrimage is an opportunity to invite people specifically and for them to be able to say it's something different, because they wouldn't be doing something like that. Whereas your average patronal – most churches would celebrate the feast day of somebody even if it's not their patronal, so I suppose from that point of view we would lose a lot if we didn't do it.<sup>462</sup>

Another interviewee wanted to increase the profile of the pilgrimage in order to make other churches see it as a celebration to be part of, rather than seeing it as a negative:

Pilgrimage day is going to continue to be important and if only it could expand. Now I've kept back from that, but I would be very happy to push forward and push ideas on how to make further connections with other parishes and to get them to see that this sharing in this is not some form of idolatry (laughs) which some members of the Church of England consider it to be.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Quotes from taped interview, April 2010.

<sup>463</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.



The other point raised by Eade and Coleman, as to the ‘specialness’ of pilgrimage is also relevant here. Whilst there is no doubt that parishioners felt that pilgrimage was special, it should be remembered that this specialness was taking place within the space of their local church. Mass and Benediction were celebrated alongside more everyday activities such as the preparing and serving of food. The influence of the history of St Mary’s, combined with its current, urban situation as described above, means the current pilgrimage is rooted in a particular social and cultural context. The pilgrimage at St Mary’s, although it was a religious event was not therefore divorced from the everyday.

### **Contestation and Pilgrimage**

The comment from the last interviewee reveals to some extent the possible points of contestation that the pilgrimage at St Mary’s may engender. As has already been mentioned in chapters four and five of this research, the place of Mary and Marian devotions within the Church of England has been subject to much debate and continues to be a source of conflict. Some of these elements have been played out in pilgrimage at St Mary’s. Not all the congregation were as comfortable with all aspects pilgrimage as the comments have so far suggested:

The pilgrimage – I have great difficulty with quite a few Marian festivals that we actually have at church full stop, but pilgrimage I can more or less cope with. I find things like Benediction quite hard because Benediction is – I can sort of see, I know what it is – but I can’t, can’t cope with all this kneeling down and veneration bit which a lot people do. And some people would have a completely different story of Benediction than what I have. Having said that, at this year’s pilgrimage I found the Benediction service quite moving for some strange reason;

I can't quite fathom out why I found it moving but it did actually touch me for the first time ever, I think.<sup>464</sup>

Members of the congregation recalled previous pilgrimages being interrupted by evangelical Protestant groups. Here one member of the congregation explains what happened: 'Outside the church's bounds with a police presence too were protesters. Protesting against the pilgrimage to Mary and considering Mary no more than the Mother of Christ and having no other significance.' They were asked where the protestors had come from:

No, I don't remember now, but they were from a sect that just couldn't accept that this was so. And they were part of the mainstream of the Church of England and they were protesters and that's all I remember.

They (the protestors) were standing outside. We went out on a long journey and we had the statue which they didn't like, and the police were there to, as it were, protect us; and they (the protestors) were very vociferous, they weren't violent as such but they were very vociferous indeed, shouting "idolaters!" and all kinds of other stuff. Didn't like the statue being paraded around the street.

A statue of Mary was included in the pilgrimage, carried on the shoulders of the congregation 'rather like the processions you might see in Greece, Spain or Portugal, wherever, like European tradition you might say.' There was a Mass held in the open air but this was continually interrupted by the protesters and in the end, the police were

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<sup>464</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009.

forced to intervene and remove them. The protestors did not go into the churchyard itself because as the interviewee explained:

because they knew they would be hauled away and charged with something. As it was they were eventually, they were just released after a while and after the service was over and they were held on the basis of disrupting a public meeting. So I can recall that vividly. I can still see the Bishop of London standing there and he just carried on – he was completely unmoved.<sup>465</sup>

The other point of contestation at St Mary's is the holy well. The well is significant in terms of its place in the church's history and for members of the congregation this is a significant part of worship. People use the water regularly and it is a main feature of the pilgrimage day when everyone present is sprinkled with the water. The use of the holy well is another example of the embodied practice of religion. As Ronan Foley has observed:

The role of embodiment is essential to understanding human engagement with the well as healer. From the physical acts of drinking the holy water and rubbing it on the body, to the removal of diseases in symbolic but embodied forms, all represent a form of healing that is at heart phenomenological. It is lived, experienced and enacted in place. The body, through external contact with the earth, and internal contact via the ingestion of water (and as an affective felt site of the cure), is central to that embodied relationship with health in place.

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<sup>465</sup> Quotes from taped interview, November 2009.

In addition, the material and metaphorical connections at the holy well between health, place and the body, are further deepened by individual and communal performances and ownerships.<sup>466</sup>

There are no votive offerings left at the shrine or near the holy well. There are no ‘folk’ or popular rituals associated with the shrine. Rituals and practices here would appear to be sanctioned by the Church. Despite this official sanction, local historians doubt the veracity of the claims made for the source of the water. There was a spring in the vicarage garden but this is not the same source of water as that which comes up into the church. I asked one member of the congregation who was himself involved with local history what he felt about the well. This was someone who had previously expressed their Marian devotion and who had considered converting to Roman Catholicism. He was more sceptical of the holy well:

Well I will be very candid with you, in physical terms it’s called a spring but it’s very hard to determine that as well in the historical sense, so forgive me if I do but there are some things I will suspend judgment on because of my faith, but other things I’m looking for a bit more scientific proof before I make a judgment that the holy well is a holy well. There is a lot of body of negative evidence that it isn’t a holy well, nor was it ever properly a holy well *per se*, and that was based on the stuff I got from the archives and from the historical records of the church except it has, in my opinion water that comes from beneath the church to me is holy and sacred and is therefore able to be dispensed, but what you have to do in this modern world is check the quality of the water and some of it came out as tap water in recent times and it ended up in the sump and the sump is where the water

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<sup>466</sup> Ronan Foley, Healing Waters: Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). p.46.

is. So I'm not saying that makes it any the less efficacious but there were problems with the water supply.<sup>467</sup>

The local history society explained any evidence that challenged the notion of the well being holy did not matter to the congregation as it was a matter of faith.<sup>468</sup> The response given by the interviewee above shows the complexities of such faith matters. In chapter six it was shown how people were prepared to discuss, even challenge aspects of their faith. This comment above further reveals this willingness. It is interesting here to find an example of where the officially sanctioned aspect of worship, the holy well, is challenged by a worshipper. This is in contrast to the way in which official versus popular worship is presented in black Madonna literature. For example, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum has argued that pilgrimages and festivities associated with the black Madonnas she researched in Italy were subject to censure from church authorities.<sup>469</sup> Here at St Mary's, the use of the holy well, which would fit into the existing black Madonna narratives of healings and natural phenomenon as identified in chapter one of this research, is part of the official celebrations.

## **Pilgrimage and Marian Symbolism**

The final section this chapter looks at the Marian symbolism and imagery that is part of pilgrimage. In the previous two chapters it was observed that Virgin Mary as represented by the black Madonna was not always prominent in terms of ritual and worship within St Mary's. This was despite the fact there were numerous images of the Virgin Mary around the church. Given that the pilgrimage day is where the shrine of the Virgin Mary is celebrated, the assumption might be that the Virgin Mary and the statue of the black

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<sup>467</sup> Quote from taped interview, November 2009

<sup>468</sup> Conversation with representative from Brent Local History Society, November 2009

<sup>469</sup> Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy.

Madonna are central to the celebrations. There is certainly more of a focus on the Virgin Mary in the words and images used on pilgrimage day. These representations of Mary draw on a range of biblical, theological and artistic sources. As pilgrims arrived, they were given a service booklet.<sup>470</sup> The front cover showed an image of Our Lady of Willesden in a style of an Orthodox icon. This style of Marian image can be found elsewhere in the church and it is an icon of Mary that is now carried at the front of the pilgrimage.

Within the booklet itself, there are two further images of Mary. On the front inside cover, a simple black line drawing depicts Mary with her arms outstretched over the roof of a church, with many stick-like figures entering the church below, reminiscent of a *vierge ouverte*. Meaning the 'Opening Virgin', this is a statue of Mary that opens up to reveal depictions of Christ and/or the church within it. The words 'Hail to you, mother of the church' accompanied the image on the booklet. This connection of Mary to the Church is a long standing one, with Mary seen as representing the Church itself.<sup>471</sup>

The final representation of Mary, on the last page of the booklet, is a drawing of the statue of Our Lady of Willesden. In this picture, the faces of the Virgin and Christ are given a much more life-like appearance than on the actual statue, humanising the image. The first and final pictures represent Mary in 'Virgin in Majesty' or 'Seat of Wisdom' pose. This is a pose that is often associated with black Madonnas and is the pose used for the statue of the black Madonna at St Mary's.<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> See Appendix 2 for booklet illustrations.

<sup>471</sup> See for example Sarah Jane Boss, "The Development of the Virgin's Cult in the High Middle Ages," *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London and New York: Continuum, 2007). p.159.

<sup>472</sup> For a more detailed exploration of Mary as wisdom see Boss, "The Development of the Virgin's Cult in the High Middle Ages." p.167.

The robes of the priest officiating were decorated with pictures of Mary and events in her life. The homily concentrated on the joy, love and humility of the Virgin Mary. In my field notes, I observed that the emphasis on Mary's humility was challenging. Humility made her a stereotypical, servile woman. Mary was the example of perfect womanhood that no other human woman could compete with, and indeed women had suffered for centuries as a direct result of Mary's perfection. The emphasis on – not to say exaltation of – Mary's submission then may appear inexplicable. But for the priest giving the homily this humility was not seen as a false modesty or grovelling on the part of Mary. Rather the priest explained that Mary's willingness to submit to the will of God is the consequence of genuine free will. This appeared to confirm the claims highlighted in chapter three, that the Virgin Mary represented all the oppressive, patriarchal aspects of Christianity. However, this was taking place in front of the statue of the black Madonna, a figure that allegedly challenged such oppression.

The prominence given to the Virgin Mary in pilgrimage at St Mary's was somewhat reduced in the second part of the pilgrimage. Here the symbolism shifted to a more Christological focus. Given that this was the part of the pilgrimage that includes the sprinkling of water from the holy well, I found this surprising. My assumptions had been that the holy well would have had more association with the Virgin Mary. At other shrines, such as Lourdes for example, the holy water and the Virgin Mary are closely associated. At St Mary's, whilst some members of the congregation may see Mary as part of the healing<sup>473</sup> in terms of the official place of Mary in the pilgrimage service, she is less prominent in this part. This part of the pilgrimage included Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament being brought to the altar and the congregation receive blessings in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Here Mary's role of intercessor was stressed. It

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<sup>473</sup> See examples in the previous chapter

was only in the final part of the service that Mary returned to be the focus with the prayer to Our Lady of Willesden said by the whole congregation together and the final hymn ‘O Maria.’

What the above examples illustrate is that the figure of Mary encompasses all of these attributes that can be read as either positive or negative. Orsi thus describes the Virgin Mary as a figure that ‘cannot be held in place by a single attribute – sorrow or delight, purity or compassion – or held accountable for a single social consequence – liberation or oppression, solidarity or fracture.’<sup>474</sup> The seemingly contradictory notion of humility as powerful reveals the tension within the figure of Mary. In chapter three of this thesis, I identified the problematic dualism that had been created between the black Madonna and the Virgin Mary. The different aspects of Marian imagery found in the shrine, including that of the black Madonna, described in this chapter further demonstrate how unhelpful it is to see black Madonnas and the Virgin Mary as polar opposites. Instead, the evidence from St Mary’s suggests the figure of the black Madonna should be seen as another type of representation of the Virgin Mary.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to look at the place of pilgrimage at St Mary’s church. The chapter began by examining the debates around pilgrimage scholarship. It was suggested that pilgrimage at St Mary’s did not fit easily into either the ‘communitas’ or ‘contestation’ views of pilgrimage. Instead, it was argued that elements of both of these could be found. The contestation was present in how some members of the congregation felt about the pilgrimage and some of the devotions associated with it. There was

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<sup>474</sup> Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them, p.48



contestation around the holy well in the church with local historians and indeed a member of the congregation challenging the veracity of the claims made for this. Other points of contestation came from outside of the church, with other denominations of protestant Christians holding protests outside the church against what they perceived as idolatry. These modern day objections to the pilgrimage have echoes of the historical stories of how the shrine was destroyed during the Reformation. So not only is the pilgrimage and holy well a link with the church's past, but so too the contestation.

The chapter looked at the importance that pilgrimage had for the congregation. They explained how pilgrimage was a means by which they could express their faith and this was both a personal and public expression. The pilgrimage was a means of expressing the specialness of St Mary's, but also a way of reaching out to Christians in other churches. Pilgrimage contributed to the creation of a Christian identity in a multi faith city. Drawing on Orsi's work on urban pilgrimage, I suggested the pilgrimage route be seen as one his 'maps of being.' Unlike the rural landscapes of Walsingham, the pilgrimage at St Mary's takes place in an urban setting. This has special significance as the route took the pilgrims through an area known for violent crime. The pilgrims of St Mary's are taking part in an event that has historical origins but this is very much a pilgrimage for today as it makes its way through the local housing estate.

The final section of the chapter looked at the Marian symbolism of pilgrimage day. These symbols and images depicted Mary with various roles and titles. It might at first appear out of place to look at symbolism when the main theoretical approach of this thesis is one of lived religion. I would defend this by saying that in order to understand the relationship worshippers have with the divine presence of Mary, it is useful to look at the myriad ways in which they might encounter her.

I would suggest that the variety of symbols on display at St Mary's during pilgrimage demonstrate how multilayered Mary is. However, it was also shown how in the second half of the service, Marian symbolism gave way to Christological symbolism. It could be argued that this is another example of the specific position Mary occupies in the Anglican Church. Despite this being a pilgrimage to a Marian shrine, ultimately Mary is subordinate to Christ. It was clear that despite the Marian symbolism used, the black Madonna herself was not subject to any specific rituals associated with the pilgrimage now she is no longer walked around the streets as part of the procession. Certainly the colour of the Madonna appeared to have no particular significance.

## Conclusion

In this research I have investigated the phenomenon of the black Madonna. The main aims of the research were to analyse the existing literature and critically examine the claims made regarding the origins and meanings of the black Madonna in those claims. In order to try and challenge some of the existing assumptions of the literature, I conducted fieldwork at one specific black Madonna in an Anglican shrine in London. Here I explored the relationship between the congregation and the black Madonna shrine at which they worship. It has been the combination of this critical examination with the results of the fieldwork that has made this research an original contribution to the field of black Madonna studies. In these concluding remarks, I begin by summarising the findings of the research and drawing out the arguments made. This conclusion will also reflect critically on what the thesis has been able to achieve. Finally it will discuss suggestions for future study.

## Summary of Findings

After conducting a review of the existing literature and setting out the methodological approaches used, I began the main body of the thesis in chapter three. In this chapter I argued that the 'one size fits all' approach to the subject matter led to particular assumptions being made where black Madonnas may have originated from and how these figures should now be understood. Research influenced by feminist and goddess spiritualities had 'paganised' the figure of the black Madonna and the Christian context in which these figures existed had been sidelined. By drawing on the work of the likes of Hutton, Eller and Loraux,<sup>475</sup> I argued that it was possible to challenge these assumptions

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<sup>475</sup> Loraux, "What Is a Goddess?.", Hutton, The Pagan Religions of the British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy. Hutton, "The Discovery of the Modern Goddess.", Eller, The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future.

and my own research into the black Madonna at St Mary's would be attempting to do this.

In some sections of the above literature, the black Madonna was presented as a positive, liberating force. Drawing on theories of race and gender from the likes of Hill Collins, and on the critical work of Eller<sup>476</sup> on black Madonnas, I argued that there were several problems with presenting the black Madonna in this way. Firstly, there was a dualism created between the black Madonna and the Virgin Mary. There was an intrinsic 'othering' of the black Madonna in that dualism. Secondly, this was further complicated by an explicit linking between 'real' and symbolic blackness, such as in Picknett's theories about black Madonnas and Mary Magdalene.<sup>477</sup> There was little critique of the theories being offered, particularly in relation to the claims made about the blackness of Mary Magdalene and the meanings of symbolic and literal blackness. As I commented in chapter three, although the intention behind these theories are meant to be taken as positive step towards racial equality, by not offering any reflection on the claims made, there is a danger of such claims simply reinforcing existing racial and gender stereotypes.

I would argue that making more general claims as to the meanings and origins of black Madonnas might lead us to neglect other aspects of research into these images that are just as interesting. By only seeing black Madonnas in terms of their mysterious origins in European pre-history, and consequently as part of a underground, radical tradition in mostly Catholic, southern Europe, there may be other aspects of black Madonnas that are completely overlooked. An obvious example of this problem is Chiavola Birnbaum's claim there are no black Madonnas in Protestant England highlighted in the introduction

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<sup>476</sup> Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought. Eller, "White Women and the Dark Mother."

<sup>477</sup> Picknett, Mary Magdalene: Christianity's Hidden Goddess.

to this thesis. It is therefore important that we try to examine a black Madonna in its particular historical, geographical and cultural context.

The emphasis in the existing literature was on the mystery and aura surrounding black Madonnas but with this largely came from the authors themselves. There was little engagement with worshippers at shrines, the most notable exceptions to this being the work of Deana Weibel<sup>478</sup> and Jeanette Rodriguez.<sup>479</sup> As I have mentioned at the beginning of the thesis, the work of both these researchers have been influential on my work. I felt it was important to try and examine a black Madonna in a Christian context and given the lack of research on black Madonnas in the United Kingdom, this was another facet I looked at in the course of my research. It was these areas that provided the basis for the research on the black Madonna at St Mary's Church.

In order to look at the areas mentioned above, I chose to approach the research from a 'lived religion' perspective; that is, to look at the religious experiences of people who attended St Mary's and the emotions and actions that comprised those experiences. This approach is also a relational approach which means it considers the relationships people had with their church, the black Madonna and with one another. To gather the information that formed the basis of the thesis, I used ethnographic data collection methods which included observation and interviewing as well as using material gathered from archives.

Chapter four looked at the interactions between history, narrative and place at St Mary's. In this chapter I discussed how historical narratives of the church had been constructed

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<sup>478</sup> See for example Weibel, "Of Consciousness Changes and Fortified Faith: Creativist and Catholic Pilgrimage at French Catholic Shrines."

<sup>479</sup> Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women.

over the centuries. The work of local historian Ken Valentine had uncovered new information about the shrine which revealed how important it had been in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Valentine's work revealed much about attitudes to the shrine during the Reformation which ultimately contributed to the shrine's destruction. Although some of his work challenged much of the accepted history, I would argue that his new information about the later popularity of the shrine has made an important contribution not only to the local history of Willesden, but also to the wider religious history of London and the place of Marian devotion in England.

Despite Valentine's attempts to disprove the early stories of the shrine, they have remained, giving the shrine its authenticity; contributing to the notion that St Mary's was a 'special place' and helped to create an identity for the congregation who came from a wide range of backgrounds. In interviews, worshippers revealed how they actively engaged with their church's history and how it had an effect on their religious practice. The notion that the black Madonna actually survived its alleged destruction is testament to the potency of stories.

Chapter five examined the place of the black Madonna at St Mary's church and the relationships created between the statue and members of the congregation. I was luckily enough to have interviewed the artist who created the black Madonna. She described her influences in deciding what the statue should look like and the artistic process involved in its creation. The image provoked some strong reactions when it was initially installed. I speculated that to have such a large, bold image representing the Virgin Mary as black may well have contributed to those reactions.

The chapter considered wider aspects of Marian devotion at St Mary's and the range of views and differing levels of practice with regards to those devotions. The emphasis on Mary as mother was a significant part of those devotions. These arose out of personal experiences of healing and also from theological understandings of Mary as the Mother of God. Finally, the chapter considered the blackness of the Madonna at St Mary's. As I mentioned in chapter five, for those people I interviewed and from observations made during the fieldwork, it appeared that the importance of the black Madonna was not concentrated in any particular group within the church. I would argue that in considering the importance of the Virgin Mary, whether in the form of the black Madonna, or in any other form, we need to take account of the fact that St Mary's is an Anglican church and this has a bearing on attitudes to Marian devotions.

Chapter six widened the focus to look at other features of religious expression and experience at St Mary's. In interviews, people had described the journeys they had taken, some literal, some spiritual to get to St Mary's. What was interesting here was the range of experiences people had had. For some the reason for choosing St Mary's was a more practical choice, for others it was a matter of liturgy. When setting out the theoretical and methodological approaches of this thesis, I explained that when looking at religion as lived, the materiality of religion was a central consideration. This chapter examined a wide range of experiences from prayer, healing to what might be considered more mundane activities such as singing. This range was chosen because I wanted to demonstrate that people's religious experiences were not dependent on any particular activity. Instead, how people constructed their religious lives was more layered and complex. How they discussed their own religious lived could not be easily categorised into sacred or profane. Rather it was a blending of different actions and experiences.

In the last section of chapter six, I looked at the ways in which worshippers acted within and experienced their religious tradition. Once again it became clear that this was not straightforward. Worshippers profoundly reflected on their faith and how it was practised. Looking at religion as lived might imply we do not have to consider the ways in which theology and liturgy effect practice. However, it was clear from what people said in interview that both theology and liturgy were of importance. What I proposed was that as a researcher I do not have to adopt a theological approach in order to examine those concerns. Lived religion can provide a non-theological approach by considering the ways people relate to theology, liturgy and presence whilst at the same time considering the importance of cleaning the church, if we are to take a comprehensive view of religious experiences.

The final chapter in the thesis looked at the place of pilgrimage at St Mary's. I started the chapter by looking at some of the debates that have taken place in pilgrimage studies over 'communitas' and 'contestation'. I did this in order to consider where my own research could be located within this debate. What emerged from my research was that at St Mary's there were examples of both communitas and contestation. It was felt that pilgrimage contributed to the specialness of the church and I would argue that this is related to the points made in chapter three as to the importance of history and its place at the church. The revival of pilgrimage was another way in which the church could connect to its past. But pilgrimage is also more than a reinvention of tradition. The pilgrimage has real relevance today for its pilgrims. As was pointed out, the church uses this public demonstration of Christian faith to reach out to the local community and to make connections with other churches. For those who take part it is a public expression of their faith.



Another theme that recurred in this chapter was the special character of the church. It was felt that pilgrimage contributed to this specialness and I would argue that this is related to the points made in chapter one as to the importance of history and its place at the church. The revival of pilgrimage was another way in which the church could connect to its past.

There were points of contestation during pilgrimage. These came from inside and outside of the church. Outside of the congregation, the pilgrimage was subject to protests from evangelical Protestants. Within the congregation, in interviews the attitudes to pilgrimage were largely positive although one person did express some reservations about pilgrimage, although this was more aimed towards Benediction as part of the pilgrimage service than the pilgrimage itself. The other point of contestation was the holy well. The well and its water are an important part of worship for some who used the water regularly for healing. Once again it was local historians who challenged the historical basis for the well. The chapter also looked at the Marian symbolism of pilgrimage day. Although Mary was a significant part of pilgrimage day and there were multiple ways in which Marian symbolism and imagery were used as part of the service, I ended by concluding that in the second half of the service, the Christological symbolism was foregrounded over that of Mary.

In this study, the black Madonna of Willesden emerged as a figure that challenged and confirmed previous assumptions. Having had the opportunity to interview the artist who created her and found information regarding the commissioning of the statue in the church archives, it was clear that the statue was not intended to be anything else other than a representation of the Virgin Mary. From other interviews and observations conducted, the relationships between the congregation and the black Madonna were shown to be multi-layered and multi-vocal. It cannot therefore be ruled out that there

were no 'religious creatives' as Weibel identified at other black Madonna shrines.<sup>480</sup> But in terms of those people with whom I did have contact, there was no indication that the black Madonna of Willesden was connected in any way with alternative or unorthodox traditions.

As to the whether the black Madonna was important to the congregation, there was no straightforward answer. For some she was a central part of their worship and devotion, for others they were not interested in any way. There was a sense from some people that the church would not be same without her, but this was more because she was a familiar part of the fabric of the church, not because any great symbolic significance was attached to her. For at least some of the congregation, the black Madonna had no bearing on their reasons for attending the church. It was simply their local parish church. Even for those people who did take part in Marian devotions, there were more important reasons to attend; the style of liturgy or the musical aspects of the church for example.

What was particularly interesting was the fact that whilst the history of the church was identified as important, and indeed as one of the reasons for the church being a special place, this was not always connected to the existence of the black Madonna. The black Madonna alone did not necessarily give the church its authenticity. It was the thought that the location had been a place of worship for over a millennium that gave it its atmosphere. When the black Madonna was considered important, she was seen as representation of the Virgin Mary, and not simply as a 'black Madonna.' Unlike the dualistic construction of the black Madonna and the Virgin Mary discussed in chapter three of the thesis, the black Madonna of St Mary's was very much integrated with Virgin Mary.

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<sup>480</sup> See for example Weibel, "Of Consciousness Changes and Fortified Faith: Creativist and Catholic Pilgrimage at French Catholic Shrines."

The notion of a clash between church hierarchy and popular devotion to black Madonnas as highlighted by some scholars<sup>481</sup> I discuss in the first two chapters of the thesis was not apparent at St Mary's. Although the extent of devotion to the black Madonna may have differed in practice and intensity between parishioners, such devotion was nonetheless an officially sanctioned element of worship at the church. Likewise the use of the holy well, whether people chose to use the water at home, or receive a blessing from the church itself, was also within the bounds of accepted practice. When there were challenges to these practices, they were either from outside of the church, such as the local historians disputing the claims about the well. Or else they came from members of the congregation who were not as comfortable with certain devotions and even here there was not a direct challenge in any confrontational or censorial way. People largely accepted that others may have a different tradition from themselves.

I am aware that people may not always have been completely open when they spoke to me but I found no evidence that worshippers related to the black Madonna in the politically liberating way identified in some of the previous literature as being a central part of the symbolism of the black Madonna. As I have discussed in chapter five, there were instances when issues of race and gender did surface, but this was not because the black Madonna was seen as politically or spiritually more radical than a white representation of the Virgin Mary. This appeared to be more motivated by an interest in why the Virgin Mary may have been portrayed as black and how such a portrayal of a dark skinned Madonna might have reflected what Mary may really have looked like.

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<sup>481</sup> See for example Begg, The Cult of the Black Virgin. Birnbaum, Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy.

## **Critical reflections**

The methodological aim of this research was to conduct a small scale, in-depth study, concentrating on the personal relationship people had with their religious practices. The reason for conducting research in this way was to illustrate the point that over generalizing in the study of black Madonna missed such experiences. The views expressed in the interviews therefore are not meant to be representative of the wider congregation at St Mary's. When conducting interviews, we have to take into consideration the possibility that people may not always wish to disclose particular information or may simply tell the interviewer what they think the interviewer wishes to hear. It should also be taken into account that particular attributes of the interviewer, in my case a white, middle class university researcher aged under forty, may affect the relationship with the interviewee. Any possible imbalance of power between the interviewer and interviewee could affect the information given by the person being interviewed.

Secondly, the very features that made the example of the Willesden shrine interesting may mean the findings are atypical in the wider context of black Madonna shrines. Specifically, St Mary's is a small Anglican parish church and not a large Roman Catholic shrine: and while St Mary's is not completely unknown, it lacks the international reputation of mainland European shrines as Chartres or Montserrat. It is important to take into consideration the different position that the Virgin Mary occupies in the Anglican tradition when compared with that of the Roman Catholic. It can therefore be argued the results of the research reflect Anglican attitudes to the Virgin Mary more than any specific significance, or lack thereof that the black Madonna may have.

Thirdly, it could be argued that the results of the research exhibit a lack of objectivity as a consequence of the relationship that developed between the congregation and myself over the course of the ethnographic fieldwork. I have discussed some of the problems associated with maintaining objectivity within research in the methodology chapter of the thesis. Namely, that this is a subject I was interested in long before I decided to study it at an academic level and that I was coming to study people's religious lives as a non-believer. However, without adopting a more subjective approach, it is possible that members of the congregation may not have been so forthcoming with their stories. It is important to consider alternative methodological approaches which could have been taken when carrying out this research. Rather than a small number of in-depth interviews, I could have used a larger scale survey to gather information on the congregation's views on and perceptions of the black Madonna. Larger surveys enable the researcher to reach a wider and potentially more representative number of people; the trade off here is that the depth of information that can be obtained in this way is much less than with face to face interviews. In my opinion, the additional depth and quality of the information obtained in the interviews conducted more than made up for the smaller sample size of my research. As McGuire has argued, information on religion gathered from social surveys can be more limited if we want to know what people actually do in their everyday religious lives. Adopting a more in-depth approach allows the researcher to escape the constraints of 'tick box' surveys where only a narrow range of experiences can be construed as religious.<sup>482</sup>

Another alternative way of conducting the research would have been to do a comparative study between the Anglican shrine at St Mary's church and the Roman Catholic shrine to Our Lady of Willesden which is also home to a black Madonna. This would have

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<sup>482</sup> McGuire, Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life.

allowed me to consider the possible similarities and differences between the two Christian traditions in their attitudes towards black Madonnas. However, the initial aim of this research was to consider one shrine in-depth rather than trying to make any grand narrative style claims as to the place of the black Madonna in the United Kingdom. The particularities of St Mary's, especially its Anglicanism and the history of its shrine were of interest in their own right and I did not feel a comparative study was therefore necessary. It would, however, be of interest in the future to conduct an in-depth study of the Roman Catholic shrine.

### **Final thoughts and suggestions for future study**

It is hoped that this thesis will provide a contribution to the following fields of study. First and foremost it will contribute to the study of black Madonnas especially those in the United Kingdom. It has shown that not all black Madonnas have to be seen as mysterious or as an alternative figure. The black Madonna can be examined in its place as an object of Christian worship and as another representation of the Virgin Mary. By focusing on a shrine in the United Kingdom, it has widened the field of study. By seeing the black Madonna as not separate from the Virgin Mary and by examining the place of the Virgin Mary in an Anglican church, I would suggest this study contributes to the field of Marian studies more widely. Similarly, it could also potentially contribute to Anglican studies. As I highlighted in chapter seven, the pilgrimage at St Mary's has not been subject to the same research as other pilgrimages in the United Kingdom so it is hoped this research will contribute to the field of pilgrimage studies.

There are implications for further study that have emerged from this thesis.

With regards to what future research may be undertaken as a result of this thesis, there are several avenues of research worth pursuing. Towards the end of my fieldwork, new

information about events at St Mary's emerged but it was too late to investigate further. I found out that in the 1980s there had been ecumenical events between the Anglican and Roman Catholic shrines and in 1997, there was an event to celebrate the holy well which was organised in conjunction with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation.<sup>483</sup> All of these events have the potential for future examination. Since beginning this thesis I have also become interested in the subject of pilgrimage and would like to do more research in this area, especially with respect to St Mary's pilgrimage to Walsingham. The themes that began to emerge around pilgrimage and identity are also promising areas to research in relation to St Mary's.

I would like to do more research on the other indigenous black Madonnas in the United Kingdom, in particular the Roman Catholic shrine of Our Lady of Willesden. One area of research I am interested in but was not able to fit into this thesis is the image of the black Madonna in literature. The black Madonna has been the subject of fictional works, for example Doris Lessing and Muriel Spark have both written short stories entitled *The Black Madonna* and in more recent times, Sue Monk Kydd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, features a black Madonna.

At the beginning of this thesis I suggested that it was precisely because there is a real mystery to the origins of black Madonna that scholars are almost compelled to fill this vacuum with their own desires and projections and that this research was not going to offer any explanation as to why the black Madonna was black. I am still reluctant to do so but since starting the research it is a question I have been asked over again. Indeed members of the congregation at St Mary's asked me this question on several occasions. Whenever I have given a paper on my research, it is a question that is always raised. In a

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<sup>483</sup> See <http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=9>. Accessed 01/02/2012

tentative answer to this question, I would say that I do find some of the syncretic explanations such as those given by Moss and Cappannari,<sup>484</sup> for example, plausible reasons for the existence of the black Madonna. In terms of the significance of the black Madonna in wider Christian context, the association of the black Madonna with the *Song of Songs* is another plausible theory. The work of Boss in particular on black Madonnas in Christian theology offers some interesting explanations.<sup>485</sup>

I found it interesting that there were instances where the black Madonna at St Mary's did appear to fit in with existing black Madonna narratives. Foundations of the church in an ancient forest, the existence of the well and stories of healings from the water certainly corresponded to those existing narratives. The stories that circulate regarding the statue's surviving the Reformation and the current statue's survival of a fire in the church might also be seen as part of the narrative strand of miracles associated with black Madonnas. I did not expect to find such stories when I initially embarked on the research. When reading or hearing about these narratives, it began to feel as if it was inevitable that the black Madonna should inspire people to want to employ such narratives about their church. Yet even with these strands of narratives circulating, the black Madonna at St Mary's remained largely on the sidelines as to what went on in the church.

Anyone who has visited a Black Madonna shrine cannot help but be impressed by the majesty and awe she projects. It is very easy to get carried away by the atmosphere and feel that the lunatic fringe were right after all. As I argued at the end of chapter three, the black Madonna can be seen as a screen onto which scholarly desires can be projected. I want to conclude by returning to the introduction of this thesis where I indicated that the entire category of black Madonna is an unstable one. This means that those scholarly

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<sup>484</sup> Moss and Cappannari, "The Black Madonna: An Example of Culture Borrowing."

<sup>485</sup> See in particular, Boss, "Black Madonnas."



projections are just as unstable. They can therefore be challenged by examples such as the black Madonna of St Mary's. This black Madonna does not fit into a template created by some of the more speculative theorising. I want to propose that what constitutes a black Madonna may be so diverse that in order to uncover any meanings we need to look at shrines at an individual level and the evidence from St Mary's would reinforce this proposal. I hope I have shown the merit in taking each shrine on an individual basis and including the voices of worshippers when considering the importance of the black Madonna. If the only question that is asked is 'why is the black Madonna black?' then the potential to examine any wider cultural importance of these images are lost.

## **Appendices**

## Appendix One: Illustrations

Figure 1. Chartres



Figure 2. Le Puy



**Figure 3. Loreto**



**Figure 4. Einsiedeln**





**Figure 5. Our Lady of Willesden**



**Figure 6. Orcival**





**Figure 7. Rocamadour**





**Figure 8. View of St Mary's Church**



**Figure 9. The Norman Font**



**Figure 10. The 1902 Madonna**



**Figure 11. Saint Sara**

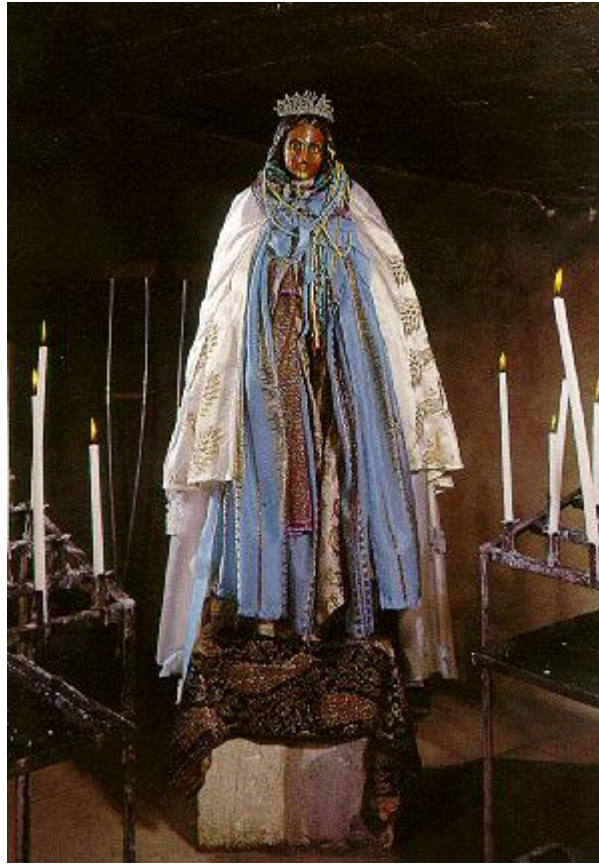


Figure 12. Tindari





## Appendix Two: Pilgrimage Service Booklet

### Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden

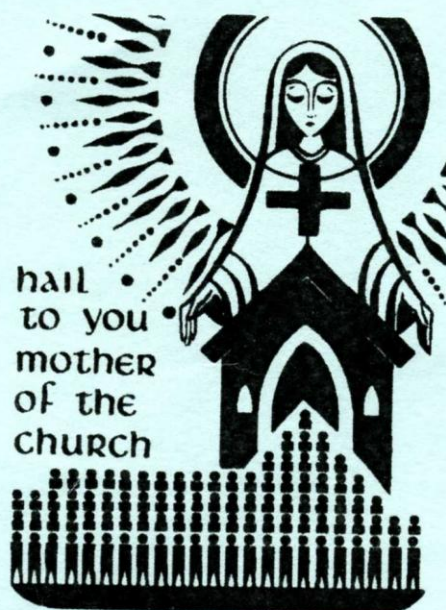
Saturday 30th May 2009



12 noon	<b>Pilgrimage Mass</b>
	Shared Lunch
2 pm	Church open for private prayer
2.30 pm	<b>Street Procession</b>
	<b>Shrine Prayers and Benediction</b>

## Pilgrimage Mass

### Preparation



**At 12noon**  
*We all stand*

**J**oy to thee O Queen of Heaven, Alleluia  
He whom thou wast meet to bear, Alleluia  
As he promised hath arisen, Alleluia  
Pour for us to God thy prayer, Alleluia

Rejoice and be glad, O Virgin Mary, Alleluia  
**For the Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia**

Let us pray

O God who by the resurrection of thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, has brought joy to the whole world. Grant that through his Mother, the Virgin Mary, we may obtain the joys of everlasting life. Through the same Christ our Lord. **Amen.**





*We stand when the bell rings for the conclusion of our Pilgrimage.*

*Priest:* Let us thank God for all the blessings of our Pilgrimage and ask Our Lady of Willesden to pray for us as we return to our daily lives.

*All:* **O blessed Virgin Mary, our Lady of Willesden,  
to your loving intercession we commend ourselves,  
our homes and friends and our communities.  
We recall with thankful hearts  
the love you showed your Son on earth  
and the blessings given to us through your prayers.  
As your devoted children  
we dedicate ourselves to his service,  
Our Lady of Willesden, pray for us  
that we may do whatever he tells us. Amen.**

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## **Appendix Three: Consent Form**



*ETHICS BOARD*

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM PRO FORMA**

**Title of Research Project: An Investigation into the Phenomenon of the Black Madonna.**

**Brief Description of Research Project:**

*This project aims to investigate how and why the icon of the Black Madonna has been the subject of speculation and interest for writers and researchers. As part of the project I wish to informally interview worshippers at St Mary's Church in order to find out more about their views and experiences of attending a church that has a Black Madonna. All participants in this research will remain anonymous, no personal information or addresses will be used. Participants will have access to any transcripts of their interviews. Information kept on computer will be kept in password protected files and any written information will be kept in lockable filing cabinet.*

*Thank you for taking part in this research.*

**Investigator Contact Details:**

Melanie Landman, PhD Student  
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Roehampton University,  
Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PH  
M.Landman@roehampton.ac.uk  
0208 392 3232 (Dept of Humanities)

**Consent Statement:**

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings.

Name .....

Signature .....

Date .....

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with me. However if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department (as I am a student researcher you can also contact the Director of Studies).

**Director of Studies Contact Details:**

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